
Dantalian no Shoka Volume1

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These are the color illustrations that were included in volume 1

角川スニーカー文庫

ダンタリアンの書架

Bibliotheca Mystica de Dantalian

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(Illustration)

1

出会いは封印を解き放つ――

悪魔の叡智「幻書」をめぐる少女ダンリアンの冒険、開幕!!

◆特設サイト開設中!

<http://www.kadokawa.co.jp/dantalian/>

Bibliotheca Mystica de Dantalian

ダンタリアンの書架

1





我は問う.....

I ask of thee

汝は人なりや？

Art thou mankind?

「このボケナス……!」



A deserted graveyard at dusk.

Powder snow was gently slipping through the branches of the trees.

There was a little girl in mourning dress, standing alone in front of a grave that had only recently been built.

"Please... teach me..." she cried out in a hoarse voice.

Her gaze was fixed on a carriage.

It was a deep black brougham parked at the corner of the graveyard.

A doll was placed by the window—a beautiful porcelain doll clad in a jet black dress.

The little girl knelt down on the withered lawn as if to pray to that doll.

"Please, grant me knowledge. Give me the power to fulfill his desire... please... I beg you..."

Her trembling voice was drowned out by a cold breeze.

The moment the girl hung her head in realization that her prayer wouldn't be answered, the door of the carriage quietly opened. A book was presented to her through the door crack.

Apart from the title that was written in relief, there was a plain crest depicted on the cover. The beautiful binding gave off the impression of a newly printed book and a centuries-old tome at the same time.

"The Phantom Book has chosen you."

A man's voice resounded from within the carriage.

The little girl raised her tear-swollen face and accepted the book with trembling fingers.

"I entrust this to you. You shall be the owner of this phantom book until the return date arrives. However, remember one thing no matter what."

"Remember... what...?" she asked back timidly.

His answer was short. He replied in a hoarse voice that felt as if it were resounding from far away:

"There exist things in this world that are not meant to be known to mankind..."

After the door had been closed again, the carriage went off restfully—and disappeared into the dark of the night, leaving back only the sound of heavy hooves.

Only the girl clad in a mourning dress, a book in her hands, remained there.

The crimson moon beheld this scene vacantly from high above in the sky.

Chapter 1 - Worship of Gourmet Food

Episode 01: Meditations de Gastronomie

Part 1

On a rough mountain road far outside the gates of the capital, there was a stopped car.

It was an old car once used by the army, a common type of automobile that was sold cheaply to the citizens during the post-war years.

There was no roof to its dimmed silver body, so the two seats were exposed directly to the elements. A rolled up blanket and some paperbacks were scattered on the leather-coated seats.

The driver of the car was a young man wearing a leather frock coat.

His age could not be determined exactly, but presumably, he was about twenty years old. Still, the face under the hat had yet to lose all its boyish features.

At the moment, he was crouching on the side of the car, tampering with the rear wheel bearing.

Although his gentle features implied a good upbringing, his hands were oddly accustomed to the use of tools and his movements resembled that of a soldier who had received special training.

"...I am bored," a girl that was sitting on the load platform addressed him.

Her age was no more than about 12 or 13 years. Her white skin seemed almost transparent and was covered by a jet black dress.

She had hip-length ebony hair and eyes that were the deep black colour of the night.

The black dress was fringed by countless laces and frills. These outlines of her were enfolded by metallic protectors on the back of her hands and a rustic tasset. Her looks reminded one of the ceremonial robes of medieval knights—an odd mixture that could be called neither dress nor armour. And finally, where normally there might have been a ribbon, she was wearing an old, metallic chest.

A big lock, tied to her with silver chains.

"I am hungry. Just how long do you plan on making me wait? First you get lost, and now you've even killed the car. Are you a good-for-nothing, Huey?"

Putting the book she was reading on her lap, she criticized the driver.

The young man named Huey put on an ironic, lopsided smile in response to the snappy tongue that didn't match her lovely appearance at all.

"Oh, I thought we got lost because you completely failed at reading the map...?"

"Ugh..." she groaned once and grew silent. She chewed on her lips, pouting, and turned away as her cheeks turned red.

The young man merely shrugged his shoulders while changing his gloves that had become dirty with oil.

"But it's certainly a bothersome situation we're in. There aren't enough parts to repair the car. We'll have to go borrow some proper tools and materials somewhere."

"...you noticed this now?" she sighed, dumbfounded.

Their car was currently stopped on a narrow land way that had only recently been hardened.

Wherever one turned around, there was just plain wasteland with patches of weeds here and there. A blacksmith or harness shop? There was not even a single building to be seen for far and wide!

"Where are you looking that you think you would get something of the likes in this region? You are about the only foolish driver in the whole world who would lose his way in a desolate place like this during this cold season."

"Well, I acknowledge your point about the season."

He looked up at the branches of the withered trees and then shook his head exaggeratedly.

"But Dalian... it seems we're not the only ones who took this route."

After he had spoken, he squinted his eyes to look in the distance

A carriage was drawing closer to them while raising a cloud of white dust behind it.

It was a big two-horse cart—more exactly, a high-class carriage equipped with suspension, usually only seen at the estates of nobles. A middle-aged man wearing an expensive-looking coat was holding the reins, whereas in the cart itself they could see a young woman.

The young driver, Huey, put his tools on the ground and stood up.

Black dressed Dalian jumped down from the loading platform and quickly took position behind Huey.

Her anxiety reminded one of a little animal unaccustomed to humans. She carefully looked up at the arriving carriage, hiding part of her head behind the book she was hugging.

The young woman spoke to the chauffeur, upon which he skillfully drew the reins.

The carriage slowed down and stopped.

The woman opened the door of the cart and poked out her head with a soft smile.

"Please forgive my silly question, but do you need help?" the woman asked earnestly. She was tall and clad in a deep-green cloak.

She didn't look like a mere servant; more like governess of a noble's child or the maid of a landlady.

Huey smiled gently.

"It would seem so. We had just lost our way when suddenly the car stopped..."

"You have lost... your way?" she asked back, bewildered.

Their car was stopped almost in the middle of wasteland, with a clear view of the surroundings. Moreover, there wasn't any fog nor was the road complicated or branched. One would have to make a big mistake to get lost.

"Uhm, well... it's a bit embarrassing but, you see, a lot happened underway..." the young man sighed with a wry smile, while the black dressed girl behind him puffed up her face. "To tell the truth, we were looking for the mansion of Graham Atkinson... do you happen to know him?"

"The mansion of Mr. Graham...?" the woman asked surprised.

She exchanged glances with the chauffeur and then nervously straightened herself.

"Could it be that you are guests of tonight's dinner party...?"

"Yes. We were invited by Mr. Graham. My name is Hugh Anthony Disward. Just call me Huey. My companion goes by the name Dalian."

"...Sir Disward? Are you...," she wrinkled her brow for some reason, taken aback.

Then she came to her senses again and bowed deeply, "Please forgive my rudeness!"

"I'm called Lesley and I am a servant at Mr. Graham's mansion. You can ride with this carriage to the mansion if you will. Naturally, we will also arrange workers for the repair of your car."

"Ah, that would be a big help. But...," Huey said and looked back.

The shoulders of the girl behind him were quivering faintly.

She was behaving like a shy young child, wary of unknown adults.

Lesley wrinkled her brow, but then seemed to be struck with an idea.

"Miss Dalian... uhm, to tell you the truth, there are some snacks in the carriage..."

Dalian twitched at the word "snacks".

She then peeked out behind Huey and looked up to Lesley.

"Snacks... of what sort?" she eventually asked with a voice one could barely hear.

Lesley smiled, relieved.

"Hm, let's see. Nothing too exceptional, but there is fried bread and..."

She started to count with her fingers, but Dalian answered right away, "We are coming...", not letting Lesley finish, while tugging at Huey's sleeves.

"My, my," Huey let out a faint sigh.

The loading platform of the carriage was piled with ingredients, such as vegetables and fruits, fish and meat, as well as manufactured foods like cheese. It was clear at a glance that all of it was fresh and of high quality.

"Are you on your way back from shopping? These would be the ingredients for tonight's dinner party, I suppose?" Huey said, a little surprised, after glancing into the loading platform from his seat.

"No," Lesley shook her head. "The pre-cooking for the dinner party is already done. What you are seeing there are the ingredients for the lord's dinner."

"All this, for Mr. Graham alone? I certainly heard that he didn't have a family..."

"Yes, all of it will be presented to the lord. The storage of goods is strictly prohibited. The freshness and quality of the ingredients is what makes the quality of the final dish. Apparently, my lord did once dismiss a past chef for using slightly injured ingredients earlier on that day."

"Aah..." Huey smiled, a little taken aback. "Mr. Graham seems to be a gourmet just like I heard in the rumours. Do you work in the kitchen of his mansion?"

"Yes... that's about right. I work as something like a kitchen maid." Lesley answered with an ambiguous smile.

Kitchen maids were employees working under the chef—in other words, trainee cooks. The fact that Lesley had been entrusted with the important task of purchasing ingredients meant that she was a particularly capable kitchen maid.

"I see. Quite impressive, considering that Mr. Graham's cuisine is on everyone's lips, even in the capital. I often see his original cooking style introduced in newspapers and it seems like the representatives of the House of Lords and several wealthy people on the mainland are persistently trying to entice his chef away."

"I've heard such rumours as well," she shook her head with a serious expression. "But as long the lord is alive, it is absolutely unthinkable that the chef would ever accept such an offer. The chef's sole aim in life is letting the lord savour the most delicious cuisine."

"...the treatment at Graham's must be incredibly good, I suspect?" Huey asked amusedly.

Lesley thought about it for a moment and replied, "Mr. Graham treats the kitchen staff very well of course, but much more than that, the thing is that the kitchen at his mansion is the perfect environment for cooks. They may use the best and the rarest ingredients at their own discretion, and even all the ordinary ingredients are of best quality and freshness. Moreover, the crops on his land are superior in terms of quality and there's even a forest abundant in fauna."

"Forest?"

"Yes. The nearby forest is a good hunting ground. There are pheasants, rabbits or even wild boars..."

"Aah... that's what you've meant, I see," Huey muttered while looking at the thick forest that expanded before the carriage. "Is that perhaps also the reason why Mr. Graham lives on the countryside rather than the capital...?"

"Of course. After all, Mr. Graham's motto is 'For the best cooking one must use the best ingredients'."

"...I see," Huey muttered.

In the meanwhile, the black-dressed girl next to him had been absorbed in stuffing her cheeks with fried bread wrapped in oil paper. From time to time, she licked her sugar smeared fingers, putting on a rapt smile every time she did so.

"You seem to be enjoying your bread, aren't you, Dalian?"

"...Correct," she answered plainly and bit again into her bread. The cautious attitude she had shown towards Lesley in the beginning had completely vanished into thin air.

While watching her warmly, Lesley said, "I am very pleased if it suits your taste." She smiled gently. "As soon as we arrive at the mansion, I can serve you some finer confectionery, but unfortunately this is all I have with me at the moment. These are the remains of the goods we presented to an orphanage."

"Orphanage?" Huey asked dubiously.

"Yes... I always send them the remaining breakfast breads when I go purchasing goods. It's a pleasure to watch the children happily eat even such food."

"So, the person that baked this was...?"

"I did. You see, I lost my parents early on and had the experience of being constantly hungry..."

The expression that flashed over Lesley's face was a bit mysterious. One could not tell whether she was happy or sorrowful.

Part 2

The gourmet's mansion was on a hill with a view over the lush forest.

Since it had been the residence of the feudal lord long ago, the building was surprisingly large. The dining hall of the feast was lined with tables that were adorned with beautiful candlesticks and sterling cutlery.

Everywhere one looked, one could see wealthy people, landlords and other people conversing with each other— without exception about tonight's dinner.

"Why are there so many people? It's unbearable," Dalian complained quietly while hiding herself in the shadow of a post.

While adjusting his brand-new necktie, Huey gave a laid-back answer, "Mr. Graham has become so wealthy because he built up a fortune in his young years by doing forward trading with corn. Even now when he has retired, he arranges a dinner party with lots of guests every month. And because of the very special cooking that is served at those, you can apparently pride yourself on getting invited."

"...what a wretched bunch," she cursed with quite a grumpy expression, which probably originated from her aversion of being in crowds.

Another reason for her bad mood was the fact that she was the target of countless curious gazes; her exotic black dress stood out even among all the other guests, dressed up as they were.

Despite her dismissive attitude, there were still quite a lot who approached her out of curiosity.

"Good evening, young lady. Is this your first visit?"

Addressed by a young noble-looking man, she tensed and tried ignoring him.

The man, however, did not even mind and continued, "I've attended several times since last year. The cooking here is even better than the rumours say! It stands to reason that Mr. Graham's company is said to have flourished because of his dinner parties. I'm sure you'll love it. The recipes he has worked out are of course splendid, but so too are the skills of the cooks that carry them out."

"...Cooks?" Huey asked subduedly.

The man who was being ignored by Dalian turned relievedly towards Huey.

"Yes, exactly. Did you know? Apparently, the chef is able to cook animals alive without letting them feel any pain. I heard that birds and predators kept sleeping comfortably even when their

head rolled, or that fish continued to swim in the tank even when they were reduced to head and bones—"

"...why would he do such obscure things?" Huey asked, raising an eyebrow.

The noble-looking man extended his arms exaggeratedly and shook his head.

"That's again a story beyond belief: he seems to be seeking for the perfect taste by doing so. Adrenalin... was it, I think. Animals emit adrenalin when they die in pain, which causes the meat to get chewy and the flavour to weaken. Of course, that's a difference so subtle we common people cannot perceive it, though."

"You mean... he is doing it just to prevent that effect...?"

"Exactly. It's splendid how much care he puts into his dishes, don't you agree? I heard he polished his knife technique and even learned the oriental 'moxibustion' and the usage of medicines, just to prevent the animals from suffering. Mind you, he has been able to work for several years for Mr. Graham."

"...quite hard to believe," Huey voiced his thoughts dryly.

The man nodded several times.

"Surely! But I think you'll believe it as soon as you've tasted the cooking."

After boasting about the cooking as if he had made it, the man parted with them in high spirits.

When he went out of their view, Dalian relaxed again.

"...what do you think about it, Dalian?"

So far he had preserved a sociable smile, but now Huey's mien turned serious at once.

"It's absurd. No common man could accomplish something like that," Dalian declared coldly.

Huey maintained a serious face.

"But what if it's the truth?"

The black-dressed girl gazed at the flame dancing on a candlestick and muttered in an even voice, "That would mean... the power of a non-human being is involved."

"I see," Huey shrugged casually.

He took a pocket-watch out of his coat and bracing himself up, said briefly:

"It's time. Let's go."

Graham Atkinson's study was to be found at a silent place, somewhat apart from the dinner party.

Outside the window one could see the huge forest and the wheat fields on the back side of the mansion. Both sides of the room were lined with bookshelves that reached to the ceiling and were packed with rare books.

There were some comfortable-looking seats in the centre, one of which was already occupied by a man.

He was probably older than fifty.

While he was a little short, his body was well-built— far from the chubbiness one would expect from a rumoured gourmet. His appearance resembled much more a soldier in employment, rather than a retired aristocrat.

"—I'm impressed."

The first action Huey took after being led to this library was not greeting Mr. Graham, but sighing in admiration at the bookshelves alongside the walls. Even Dalian could not help rounding her eyes.

"'De re coquinaria' by the gourmand Acipius of the old Rome. 'Le Viandier' by Charles VI's highly valued chef Taillevent. 'The Physiology of Taste' by Brillat-Savarin—the greatest gourmet of modern history. And the 'Qí mín yào shù' of the Ancient China. There are not only recipes, but also books about natural history and physics... you could probably count the number of other gourmet libraries of this level on one hand."

"Heh...," the owner of the study gazed at Huey with searching eyes and gave a laugh. "I see. As expected from the grandchild of Viscount Wesley Disward. You seem to have an eye for books."

"...Are you acquainted with my grandfather?" Huey gave the gourmet a surprised glance.

Graham nodded deeply with a hard to judge expression. He signalled Huey and Dalian to take a seat and ordered the butler to prepare some tea for them.

"Anyone who is a little familiar with what happens behind the scenes in this country knows about that bibliomaniac! And also about the library he owns, of course."

"What library?" Huey asked back with a straight face.

"Playing dumb won't help you, Sir Disward. The best proof is the girl you've taken with you, 'the Black Biblioprincess'. You have inherited *it* from the Viscount, haven't you? The Bibliotheca Mystica de Dantalian!"

"...I wonder what you mean?" Huey smiled in a ironic manner and inclined his head.

Dalian was still wordlessly tugging at his sleeves with downcast eyes. Her impassive countenance seemed like a beautiful porcelain doll.

"Heh," Graham sneered amusedly. "Books are splendid. You have to use your head to read them, and reading makes you

hungry. Did you know that the weight of a human brain makes about 2% of the whole body, but uses up 18% of the daily required calories? Now, the hungrier you are, the more delicious dishes you can eat."

"You read books... for the sake of eating?" Huey asked in a jesting tone.

But his dialogue partner nodded without hesitation and added, "Surely... and the same applies to my muscles. If you increase your basal metabolism by training your muscles, the amount of needed food will grow, too. Gourmet food is the greatest pleasure under the sun. Thus, I spare neither trouble nor expense."

"Hah..."

With an awkward expression, Huey looked around in the study. There weren't just lots of books, but also many tools to exercise.

And instead of a desk, there was a personal dining table.

The wine cup and plates were all made of expensive porcelain and wouldn't have been out of place in an art gallery. In a sense, this study was a splendid, extravagant dining room.

"Won't you take part in the dinner party?" Huey asked after a short pause.

Although the dinner party should have begun by now, Graham didn't seem to intend to go.

"Don't make me laugh," the gourmet ranted. "Do you ask me to dine together with a bunch that won't stop talking about silly rumours, their business and other nonsense during that holy time? *Me*? Such a dinner party is of no worth! I only organize those because I have no other choice for business. You may call it fawning on incompetent trustees."

"That is... unexpected," Huey muttered to himself.

"Why would you think so?"

"No, it's just that everyone was praising your dinner parties so highly, so I was sure you made every effort..."

"Why, I do make every effort! Doesn't that go without saying? Or did you think I would let my cooks slack off just because my guests are common people?" the gourmet asked deprecatingly. Huey silently shook his head.

Graham laughed deeply. "Well, but to tell the truth... while they are not slacking off, they don't give their best either. It's necessary to reduce the grade of perfection, so even those commoners can comprehend the taste. Do you know why?"

"No... why is that?"

"In short, for savouring the best cooking, the body of the one eating has to be at least of the same quality. Everyone knows that the meat of a well-built and healthy animal tastes good. But what about the person eating it? Do you think someone who is fat, or

whose inner organs are corroded by tobacco and wine, could ever appreciate the best cooking?" Graham sighed as if to ridicule the guests gathered at the dinner party. "I have been working on myself for a long time, caring about my health, getting myself into shape, and keeping the balance of never eating too much, but neither getting too hungry. I did all this in order to savour the best cooking. I'm not like those would-be gourmets!"

While saying so, he paraded his muscles proudly.

"I think I can understand what you mean," said Huey calmly, continuing with a strained smile, "We don't seem to have the capabilities to appreciate the cooking you're talking of, either. I am a person that neglects to live healthily and I'm quite dense to tastes ... Therefore, may we get down to business?"

"...Business, huh?"

"Yes. Why did you not only invite us to your dinner party, but also to had us come to your study, Mr. Graham Atkinson, even though we have no connection to your business whatsoever?" Huey gave him a cold glance.

Graham nodded pleasedly, "Right... I am not interested in the bunch that's here only to taste my cuisine. But you are different, Sir Disward. And so are you, Black Biblioprincess... please, grant my wish!"

"Your wish?" Huey asked suspiciously.

Graham bowed his head slowly.

"I'm talking about the Phantom Book."

A dull light flashed in his eyes. Dalian tightened her grip on Huey's sleeves, visibly tensed.

"I would merely like you to lend me just one phantom book—one among the thousands you own. The phantom book, which is said to contain forbidden cookery by the chef of Valhalla, the pagan god Andhrímnir," he said slowly, "It is called 'The Book of the Ultimate Contemplation of Cooking'. It was lost long ago and should not exist anymore. But you should know about its whereabouts. You who inherited the phantom library crowned by the name of the **demon that has might over knowledge and books** . The Bibliotheca Mystica de Dantalian!"

"...Why?" Huey repeated his question.

Graham frowned discontentedly.

"You are a researcher of gourmet food and recognized by everyone. You have collected such a giant number of cookery books and you even have one of the best cooks in the country as your employee. What more could you long for?"

"I long to savour the best cooking—no more, no less," Graham answered without hesitation. "For gourmet food is the greatest pleasure on earth. It's the ultimate desire and deeply rooted in the human nature itself. Moreover, it and nothing else was the driving force that led to the progress of our civilization. Or as

Brillat-Savarin once said: 'The discovery of a new dish confers more happiness on humanity than the discovery of a new star'. And I have yet to find it! That true bliss!"

"And that is why you want to borrow the knowledge of the demons?"

Huey gazed at him with pity in his eyes.

Graham nodded, "I sacrificed my own lifetime in order to seek the best cooking. Did you know that according to some statistics, true gourmet food does not harm the health, but rather lengthens life...? But still, I've not yet reached it. I don't have much time left. Ten, twenty years at most. I want to savour the ultimate gourmet food before my time has come—even if it means to borrow the power of a book whose mere existence is forbidden."

Huey patiently heard Graham out, but in his eyes one could clearly discover bewilderment. He shook his head, unable to understand Graham.

"...how can this be, Dalian?" he whispered to the black-clothed girl, who remained silent.

"What are you hesitating for, Sir Disward?" Irritation was mixed in Graham's voice. "Do you want money? There is no reason to hesitate in that case. Just write down the sum you have in mind on a cheque."

"...you're mistaken, Mr. Atkinson. We don't demand anything in exchange for the books," Huey sighed, slightly annoyed. "But sadly

we're not able to hand out a phantom book to you—even if we, for argument's sake, were the owners of that library."

"Why?" Graham asked in a hoarse voice, becoming rattled for the first time.

"Because that book—The Book of the Ultimate Contemplation of Cooking—has already been lent to somebody. Thirty years ago, that is."

"What did you just say...?" Graham muttered in complete bafflement.

Still raising an eyebrow, Huey continued, "In the diary of grandpa... no, of my grandfather, it was written that the 'The Book of the Ultimate Contemplation of Cooking' was handed out to someone today 30 years ago on a whim. We were sure you were the holder of the book when we travelled here. Since after all, it was shortly after that day that you got widely famous as a gourmet—"

"30 years ago...? Don't tell me that...!" He groaned deeply and sank down in his seat. Then, after a long time of silence, he muttered in a mournful voice:

"It's my head cook..."

"Eh?"

"The chef has got the phantom book. Apparently, everyone thinks that *I* have created all the recipes, and that I only have the

servants cook them for me, but that's not true. The one thinking them out and cooking them is the chef and no one else. It was right about 30 years ago when I employed the current head cook... and still... what a... ooh...!" he mumbled and held his head.

His imposing body seemed a lot smaller than before.

"What a twist of fate... so I have been eating dishes cooked using that phantom book all along? And yet I've not been able to savour the cooking of my desires? Even by using the knowledge of the demons I'm not able to reach my ideal? I firmly believed that my wish would come true if I obtained it..." Graham sighed in grief.

Huey silently looked down at him, while Dalian stood up without making a sound.

"Where is the chef?" she broke the silence.

"In the kitchen, I suppose... that cook should be preparing my dinner right now..."

"I do want to meet the chef. Immediately."

"Do as you will. There doesn't seem to be any use for either of us in talking any more," he said in an indifferent tone.

They gave each other a nod and stepped towards the entrance of the room. Her black dress softly expanded like a large shadow.

Graham addressed their backs:

"Wait! ...allow me just one more question, Sir Disward. Why did you come here if not for lending me the phantom book? Why now, after thirty years...?"

"The books that are lent by a library do have return dates, Mr. Atkinson..." Huey explained coldly without giving him another glance. "Phantom books are books that should not even exist in the world originally, and hence are sealed away. Not even we know what impact one of them could have on the world if not brought back within the time limit."

Graham looked at them in bewilderment.

The black-dressed girl turned around quietly and proclaimed in a cold and clear voice.

"'The Book of the Ultimate Contemplation of Cooking' has been lent with a time limit of thirty years. The return date is—tonight."

Part 3

After leaving Graham's workroom, Huey headed together with Dalian to the kitchen.

On the way they passed through the hall of the dinner party.

The main dishes were served out and the party was reaching its peak. Everyone admired the arrangement of the food and exhausted their vocabulary with their high praise.

"I don't like this mood."

Huey muttered while looking at them. They somehow appeared irregular to him.

"There is also negative criticism about Graham's dinner parties. For example, that he uses endangered animals and plants in his cooking. Or there are rumours about human bones found in the garbage of the kitchen... And I guess they know about this, too."

"...what is so fun about eating all these things?"

Dalian asked back in a earnest expression. Huey just shrugged his shoulders.

"Why indeed? There are people living in this world that are thankful for anything rare. Whatever it is."

"...even though there would be countless better ingredients. Such fools. Just eat bread. And if there is no bread, do eat confectionery."

Dalian explained her own opinion with plain words.

Ignoring her, Huey continued,

"Of course there are many not doubting Graham, since he's an influential man in a high position. Even I thought so until now. But if the chef is holding the Phantom Book, then that's different.. I hope it's not going to be troublesome."

The black dressed girl didn't answer his muttering.

She glanced wordlessly at the scenery beyond the windows.

A blood-red full moon was silently hanging in the far sky.

Many cooks were at work in the kitchen.

And like one would expect of a mansion owned by a person renowned as a gourmet, the kitchen area was quite large. The ground was well paved with stone tiles, and on it, many servants, kitchen and scullery maids could be found scampering around.

Then there was one person who finished up the giant amount of dishes; the kitchen utensils seemed as if an extension of her body.

This was, without doubt, the chef of this mansion. Her movements were completely unlike that of the others.

The pot danced around in her hands almost as if it had a will of its own and an appetite quickening odour spread out just by her adding spices or sauces. When she took a knife, she cut meat with solid bones or vegetables with vivid movements and dished them up beautifully like a flower bed, despite that she didn't seem to put much power in her grip.

Huey seemed captivated and stood stock still for a while, unable to shift his gaze.

The chef noticed this and looked up.

Surprisingly, the chef was a young woman, seemingly in her mid-twenties.

She finished up the cooking without stocking, put away the knife and then approached Huey and Dalian.

"...so you were the chef of this mansion?"

Huey asked silently. Upon which the chef - Lesley - smiled apologetically.

She was the person who let them ride on a carriage and lead them to the mansion.

"I already expected... you would come."

Lesley answered looking a bit desolate.

"Why?"

Dalian was the one asking back. Lesley looked down on her in nostalgia and said,

"I've changed quite a bit in those thirty years, but you look the same like when we met, ...Black Biblioprincess. Or was it your mother that time?"

Dalian didn't answer and just gazed at her.

Instead Huey opened his mouth.

"You know 'The Book of the Ultimate Contemplation of Cooking'... don't you, Miss Lesley?"

She answered the question with silence.

"Was it you who accepted the Phantom Book thirty years ago from my grandfather?" asked Huey.

"Yes, exactly."

Lesley nodded.

"I still remember that day. It was on the day of my father's funeral. He lost his employment all of a sudden and tried to drown his frustration in alcohol. In the end, he died due to a mundane quarrel. If the Lord didn't pick me up, I'm sure I would have died."

Saying so, Lesley suddenly seemed to reconsider and shook her head.

"No, that's not quite true. If I didn't have a talent for cooking... if I hadn't read 'The Book of the Ultimate Contemplation of Cooking', the Lord wouldn't have employed someone like me with an unknown background... what really rescued me was the Phantom Book I borrowed."

Dalian stared in silence at the chef who had a bitter expression.

Huey asked in a kind voice,

"You are aware of the reason we came to meet you, right?"

Lesley smiled.

"The return date has come, hasn't it?"

After saying so readily, she took off her apron, told a kitchen maid something before starting to lead Huey and Dalian.

"Please follow me. The Phantom Book is stored in my room... naturally, I've treated it with great care and didn't do anything that would have brought damage to the book."

"Is Mr. Graham's dinner all right?"

Huey called out to Lesley's back in bewilderment.

She smiled triumphantly and nodded.

"Yes. The dinner of the Lord is almost done. I only need to arrange the last few ingredients."

Lesley kept walking while the duo followed silently behind her.

The room of the chef was underground, not that distant from the kitchen. It was a simple room that one wouldn't expect of a renowned cook. Lesley opened the old solid wood door using an old bronze key.

Dalian muttered suddenly to her back,

"Phantom Books do choose their holders themselves."

Lesley turned around with a wary expression, but Dalian kept looking straight into her face and continued,

"If someone without the qualifications is holding a Phantom Book, then this person gets engulfed in the magical power of the book... I only know very few Phantom Book Readers that held a Phantom Book for thirty years and didn't drown in this power."

"...Should I be proud about this?"

Lesley smiled, a bit bothered, before shaking her head.

"But I just prepared dishes like it was written in the book. Naturally, it didn't go all that well from the start. I used several years just to learn the basic techniques. But after I've learned those techniques, I just needed to obtain the best ingredients and draw out the delightfulness... I just continued to prepare the dishes written in the Phantom Book like this."



The intonation of her voice slowly weakened while she continued to mutter.

Her face lost every expression and looked empty, almost as if in a state of trance.

"...Where is the Phantom Book, Miss Lesley?"

Huey asked while looking around in the dark underground room.

"Not yet..."

Lesley said smiling artificially.

She took a bottle filled with an unfamiliar spice from a spice-shelf beside the entrance and opened the lid.

"The Lord is not yet satisfied with my cooking. I'm aware of this , for I've not yet made the 'true' cooking written in the Phantom Book...!"

"Lesley?"

Huey called out to her in a serious voice.

She turned around and shook the bottle with natural movements one could get charmed by. The weird-coloured fine powder poured down on Huey's entire body.

"What's this...?!"

Huey put himself on guard with a severe expression. However, without stopping to smile, Lesley said,

"Don't worry, Mr. Huey. This is just a spice I mixed myself. The smell will disappear late at night. But until then, please don't leave this room. If you do, you could get into some serious trouble..."

She said so while stepping back and grabbed the doorknob. She planned to lock in Huey and Dalian.

Huey reflexively took position to chase after her but then stopped, when he saw that the chef suddenly was holding a knife in her hands. He had noticed that Lesley wasn't looking at him, but at Dalian.

"What are you trying to do, Lesley?" Huey asked with a sigh.

"I shouldn't even need to say this."

Lesley slowly closed the door to the underground room.

With the dignified sound of metal, the door was locked with no mercy. The last thing that could be heard inside the darkened underground room was the bright voice of the chef.

"By all means I have to serve this cooking to the Lord! The best cooking I used thirty years to complete!"

Part 4

Huey searched in his pockets and took out a lighter. It was a unrefined lighter for military use developed during the war in Austria. Blue sparks scattered, the smell of burned oil started to spread out and then a small flame illuminated the underground room.

"Why do we have to get into such unreasonable troubles, when we just came to get back a loaned book...? It's always the same with work concerning Phantom Books..."

Huey complained while breathing a long sigh.

Dalian scowled at him and said,

"It is no use to weep around with a situation like this."

And then she kicked the wall of the dreary underground room, letting her greaves ring.

"What a pathetic man you are. How dense are you, to be readily locked inside such a place? With this gloomy light I can't even read a book to kill some time."

While expressing a torrent of curses, the black-garbed girl grasped tightly to Huey's back with her fingers, like an timid child who fears the dark does.

"I don't think I've been inattentive, though."

Huey said with a fed up voice while smelling the odour on his coat.

The fine powder Lesley poured over him gave out a characteristic fragrance difficult to describe.

Rather than stimulating the nose, the odour seemed to permeate right into the depths of the head. It wasn't an unpleasant fragrance, but it was unlikely to disappear so easily.

"But how did Lesley...? I didn't sense anyone crossing the boundary..."

Dalian shook her head to Huey's mutter. An extremely frail expression floated over her face.

"She might have crossed the 'boundary' from the beginning. With us just not noticing it. And now slowly, after thirty years she has..."

"Could be."

Huey didn't try to comfort her. He shook his head while putting his hand into the pocket of his coat,

"But it's not certain either. Please go away a bit, Dalian."

"...what are you planning to do?"

"We can't stay here forever, you see."

Huey took out a weapon; a top-break service revolver. A handgun used by the army.

He pointed the gun to the locked door and pulled a trigger without hesitation.

A thunderous roar resounded within the small underground room and the bullet opened a hole inside the wooden door. He shot once again, upon which the frail lock shattered and the door opened.

"...a noisy tool, as always."

Dalian cast him an accusatory glance while guarding her ears with both hands. Huey just shrugged wordlessly.

Almost at the same time as both of them left the room, several cooks came running from the kitchen with surprised miens. They probably heard the gunshots.

Huey smiled dimly, seeming to brood about how to deceive them.

However, this facial expression froze at once.

The more the cooks drew near, the more their condition changed.

Almost as if they were hypnotized, their expressions grew empty with only their eyes sparkling in a strong light; the gazes resembled those of hungry wolves.

They weren't looking at Dalian, but at Huey.

But there wasn't any hostility in the eyes of the cooks.

They emitted a more primitive desire. Hunger.

They seemed to feel an intense appetite for Huey's body.

"It appears you look quite tasty in their eyes, Huey."

Dalian stated the facts in a indifferent tone.

Huey curved his lips looking terribly annoyed.

"Lesley's spice earlier... is this odour deluding them?"

"Correct. Not bad, considering it's the cookbook the chef of Valhalla left behind... this is more troublesome than we expected."

Huey nodded to her words.

"They got us, huh? Since I also can't just shoot one of them after the other..."

"...surprisingly you also seem to have some soft parts."

The darkly-robed girl looked up to him lightly amused.

"No... I simply don't have enough bullets. Since I've already used two of them just before."

With these words Huey put away his gun.

During this action, the cooks have drawn nearer. And not just that, one could see how even more people were approaching through the floor as though they were being lured.

The servants of the mansion appeared, as well as Gentlemen and Ladies with smart appearances. In other words, the guests that attended the dinner party in the great hall.

Even they were being attracted by the Lesley's spice.

"I see. This sure is serious trouble."

Huey groaned, remembering Lesley's words.

It was almost like watching an assembling swarm of wasps that were aroused by the alarm pheromone of their fellows.

If they came attacking all at once, then Huey would have no way to prevail. His whole body would probably be mangled and eaten alive and he'd end up dead.

"...Dalian, may I borrow a book?"

He muttered mixed with a sigh and took off the glove on his right hand.

A beautiful gem was embedded in the back of his hand. A deep crimson one resembling the colour of blood.

Dalian wasn't holding a book right now. They left the book she was reading in the car behind.

Nevertheless, she nodded expressionlessly and quietly reached for her collar.

Pearly-white skin was exposed between the gaps of the wide open black dress.

And in front, in the midst of her neck, a steel chest. An old lock made of metal---

"...I ask of thee, Art thou mankind?"

Huey asked her holding aloft his right hand. It was as if he was casting an ancient forbidden spell.

And Dalian answered like a machine in a cold robotic voice.

『No... We are.....

It was right after that, that the people attracted by the spice came rushing like a giant wave to crush the two of them.

Part 5

The gourmet Graham Atkinson was currently dining.

Several plates filled with extravagant cuisine were tightly lined up on his personal dining table in his workroom.

The main dish was an unfamiliar meat dish. The freshly cooked and sliced meat had to be dipped in the specially made sauce. The sauce was superbly refined using countless different herbs and spices and its fragrance engulfed the entire room in a fascinating aroma.

Graham's appearance was fulfilled with bliss like never before.

Each time he led the silver fork to his mouth, the word of praise "Wonderful" escaped him.

The chef herself was taking on the role of the waitress, wearing a gorgeous apron.

When she noticed the figures entering the room, she restfully raised her face.

And a light expression of surprise floated over her features.

The visitors of the workroom were a party of two. A young man wearing a frock coat and a black-swathed girl.

The girl was holding a massive book in her arms. The colour of the cover of the book had already faded to a brown tint. It was a manuscript written on parchment. However, except for this no change whatsoever could be seen on their appearance.

The odour of the special mixture of spices was still rising from the body of the young man.

"I'm surprised you managed to arrive here unharmed... a great number of people was supposed to be in the big hall, but didn't you get attacked by them?"

The chef Lesley asked in a calm voice.

Huey shook his head with a wry smile.

"We had those gentlemen sleep for a little while."

"...sleep?"

"'Hazār Afsān', a collection of tales compiled in ancient Persia---"

Huey said taking a peek at the book in Dalian's arms.

"The tyrannic Islamic king Shahryār is said to have slept for thousand and one days after having gotten it read aloud to him. It's the book that was later also used as the manuscript of 'One Thousand and One Nights' and makes the ones that hear the stories of it fall asleep. However, it's not supposed to exist any more since it has been burned when the Mongolian army raided Baghdad."

"The Phantom Books that shouldn't exist in this world... right? But where on earth did you get this...?"

Lesley smiled amazed.

"I suppose this was a foolish question... you are the owners of the Bibliotheca of Dantalian. The Princess of the Phantom Bibliotheca containing 900666 Phantom Books and its gatekeeper---"

The chef reached for the wagon with the dishes and picked up a book.

The era couldn't be determined, but it was quite an old book. The words "The Book of the Ultimate Contemplation of Cooking" were engraved on its cover. Embracing this book tightly, she said in a kind voice,

"My father was a cook, too. He worked at this mansion thirty years ago... but his cuisine couldn't satisfy the Lord, no, my father just accidentally used injured ingredients once and was fired just because of that. As a consequence, he died shortly after."

"...so you're here for revenge?"

Huey said, keeping a straight face.

"Yes, that was my plan... at the beginning."

Lesley nodded pleasantly.

"I thought about modifying the cooking or mixing poison into it. However, the Lord would never accept the cooking of some subordinate cook, and if there was something mixed in the cooking, he would surely notice it. I realised that I couldn't harm the Lord as long as I didn't master the art of cookery."

Huey listened without disrupting her.

Graham continued to silently eat his dinner. His silverware could be heard resounding in the room.

"From then on I was absorbed in reading the Phantom Book I'd borrowed and spent day and night polishing my skills. Thanks to this, the kitchen has been entrusted to me and before I knew it, I've earned a reputation as a cook. Then I noticed. The Lord was completely right in firing an incompetent cook - in other words, my father."

Lesley smiled brightly with a triumphant look.

"And most of all, I began to seek for the best cooking myself. But the journey was fraught with difficulties. 'The Book of the Ultimate Contemplation of Cooking' contained many hints to achieve this goal, but the recipe for the best cooking itself wasn't written in it."

Lesley put the book away silently.

She looked contently down to her cookery lined up on the dining table.

"However... at last it has been accomplished tonight. I've made the best cooking."

A sense of fulfillment was contained in her low voice, the kind that only people who have finished a masterpiece have.

"Wonderful..."

Graham mumbled with a full mouth.

"Wonderful... This is the cooking I've been seeking for. More...
Let me eat more."

The silverware of the gourmet made woeful circles over the empty plate.

Lesley gripped her favourite knife, opened the lid of the container and vividly cut up fresh pieces of meat. She placed them on the plate with fluid movements and ladled a perfect serving of sauce over it.

Lastly, she served it soundlessly to her employer.

"The teachings of 'The Book of the Ultimate Contemplation of Cooking' were simple. Drawing the taste out of the best raw materials without hurting them. For this, I've polished my techniques and learned how to cook living beings without letting them feel pain. But this wasn't enough."

Lesley said, with a melancholic face.

"It doesn't suffice to just make sure they don't suffer. Rather, they have to find it pleasant. The secret for the best cooking was to let the raw materials feel the greatest of pleasures so they would be fulfilled with pleasurable substances while cooking them."

"...The greatest of pleasures?"

Huey asked calmly back.

"It's gourmet food."

Lesley laughed, looking a bit triumphant.

"Gourmet food is an enjoyment limited to humans. And just imagine the insurmountable delight that the person that took gourmet food to the extremes feels, when he comes across the perfect cooking. The **brain** at the instant when it's fulfilled with pleasurable substances is the best ingredient in this world."

She put down the knife on the wagon and thoroughly washed her hands in a water bowl. Then she dried them with a brand new towel and again took the Phantom Book in her hands.

"I'll return this book as I don't need it any more-"

Dalian easefully walked to her and accepted the Phantom Book.

Huey gazed wordlessly at her back.

"...I liked your fried bread."

At length, Dalian said so in a slightly sad voice. Lesley inclined her head doubtfully, but Dalian continued,

"Even without the best ingredients, it was a most fulfilled taste."

In this moment Lesley breathed up, almost like she remembered something long forgotten, and her expression froze.

But this was just for a moment.

The young chef nodded immediately as if nothing had happened and applied her attention again to Graham.

Huey and Dalian turned their backs and silently left the workroom.

"Aah... more... let me eat more..."

The gourmet murmured in an enraptured voice. The words changed to the groan of an animal in the middle and couldn't be heard well any more. Even so Lesley smiled brightly.

"Please be at ease, my Lord. There's still plenty."

Putting the freshly cut up meat on the plate, she held it out to the man waiting for her.

Then she gently closed the lid of the container containing the valuable ingredient. This container had once been the skull of the man called Graham Atkinson.

The gourmet, famous in the capital, led a piece of his own freshly cut up brain with relish to his mouth and, with a blissful mien, --- smiled.

Part 6

There was a car stopped in midst of a mountain pass.....

It was an old car once used by the army, and the dim silver body of the car was wet by the early morning fog. The right back wheel was dismantled and the young driver was crouching beside it. A fluffy blanket was laid on the leather-coated seats with a little girl snuggled up in it like a cat.

"I am bored."

She said ill-humouredly. Several thick books that she had already read, were piled up behind her.

"I am hungry. How long do you plan on making me wait, just to replace one or two metal pipes? We went through hardships getting the parts from a car at the mansion and walking off with them until we arrived, and even so, we had to stay up all night. Just how incapable are you, Huey?"

"...I couldn't get parts with the same standard, so I need some time! Well, after forcibly applying some glue, it should hold until we arrive at the town, I guess."

Saying so, the young driver started to tamper again with the bottom part of the defective car.

Dalian sighed long and looked into the distance.

The morning sun was illuminating the horizon a brilliant white. The outlines of the forest were no longer sunken in darkness but now slowly brightened. She also noticed wheat sprouts showing themselves on the slopes that seemed like mere wasteland before.

The street was gently bent with no end in sight.

A single carriage was drawing near on this street.

An old peasant was riding it. The loading platform was fully loaded with straw bundles.

"What's up at such a place?"

The peasant took his time and slowly stopped next to them.

"As you can see. It has been like this since the car got broken last night."

The girl in the blanket pouted and answered bluntly.

Upon this, the peasant laughed out loud, amused.

"Hoho, that's indeed a bother. Is the repair progressing?"

"Correct... I won't let him say 'no', now that he has made me wait this long."

"Haha... I see, I see. Then I'll give you something to eat while you wait. I'm sure it's going to fill your stomach a bit, young lady."

With these words the peasant presented two fist-size potatoes. They were wrapped up in newspaper, steam was faintly rising from it and the smell of melted butter spread out gently.

Dalian seemed bewildered and looked up to the wrinkled smiling face of the peasant.

"Is it really okay? Isn't this your breakfast...?"

"You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours, right? Accept it without reservation. Oh, or do you not like potatoes?"

The girl shook her head to the peasant's words.

She stretched out her protector equipped hands and accepted the warm potatoes.

"Thank you..."

She whispered, and bit into the potato. Then she stuffed her cheeks wordlessly for a while.

Before long, she raised her face when her potato shrunk to about half of its size. She smiled with a face appropriate to her age, and with butter and potato skin all over the region around her lips.

"It's tasty... the best..."

"Hahaaha! Is that so? ...I'm pleased to hear that. I think there's no seasoning that can win against an empty stomach."

The peasant narrowed his eyes contently and laughed.

Wishing them a good trip, he left them with his loaded carriage. Dalian saw him off with her cheeks still stuffed with potatoes.

"...all right, this should do for now."

After saying so, Huey stood up. He started the engine by turning the hand crank and returned to the driver seat.

A relieved Dalian looked to the sky and took her seat, still wearing the blanket.

The car moved off, producing an awkward sound of metal smashing together. After they rode for a while on the forlorn road, Huey seemed to have remembered something and asked gently,

"Dalian, can I have some of the potato, too?"

Her answer was simple.

"No. This is my potato."

"But I'm rather hungry, having been repairing all night long."

"No. It was originally your fault that we stood still there."

Huey shook his head, annoyed.

"I got it. Just give me the other one."

"Are you still half asleep? Both of them are mine."

"Please, at least half..."

"No. What a greedy man you are."

Dalian said, amazed.

"Who is!"

Huey muttered with a miserable expression.

With the two of them arguing on it, the car disappeared slowly into the morning fog.

The housekeeper who was living at the mansion was the first to notice the abnormality.

A stench could be smelled within the darkness.

The fishy stench of blood mixed with the distinct smell of an animal.

She first suspected the stray cats living around the mansion.

One of them, a crafty old black cat, once sneaked into the mansion and ate the Lady's parrot in a grotesque manner.

The Lady's fury at that time was beyond normal. Thus, it had been a real bother for the servants. An incident that gets one fed up just by remembering.

That's why she reluctantly left her bed and went to the main wing, bathing in the moonlight.

It was still deep in the night.

The town was silent and the mansion was dark, without any lights. One could feel a strong abnormal stench in the stagnant darkness.

"...My Lord?"

The housekeeper called out when she heard something while climbing the stairs.

A clanking sound resounded below her.

Glass splinters were all over the carpet. The corridor window had been wrenched open, breaking the glass.

And the landlord was lying collapsed in the bedroom in front of the shattered window.

"Are you all right, my Lord? What happened here...?"

The housekeeper was surprised and went to help him, but then stopped her movements right after she entered the room.

She took a breath out of fear.

What was lying collapsed there wasn't her master any more, but a lump of meat in a human shape.

His throat was torn up and the blood that had spurt out from it dyed the room in black.

His clothes were raked by sharp claws. His expression was frozen in a state of distress.

The young lady was also in the room. as was her mother; lying upside-down in order to guard her daughter.

"S-Someone..."

The housekeeper slowly stepped backwards and unconsciously averted her gaze from the corpses.

Then she noticed. Something was moving inside the room.

The **something**, that had hidden itself behind the corpses, raised its upper body.

It looked like a beast and was about two heads taller than an adult man. It was big and seemed to easily weigh multiple times as much as the short-built housekeeper.

Raising its wolf-like head, it stared at her.

A body covered with black hair.

A sharp nose and a wide open mouth. Golden eyes.

Lastly, unusually strong, well developed muscles on its limbs.

"Hya!HYAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!"

The housekeeper screamed out.

Maybe the beast was surprised by her voice, maybe not. But it turned around with unbelievable agility and broke through the window to the outside.

It landed on the wall surrounding the mansion and then, for one moment, looked up to the sky with the blood on its fur sparkling.

Then the beast disappeared, melting into the dark---

Chapter 2 - Pedigree

Episode 02: Crossbreed

Part 1

A pub near the rail station was currently crowded with people wanting lunch.

Dishes, of which only the portions were good, were lined up on the counter and the bearded host was busy moving around.

Almost all the guests were wearing plain clothes and seemed like workers.

Many of them looked rude and there were also ones within the mass that already reeked of alcohol.

In the corner of this pub, there was a party of two with an atmosphere different from the rest.

A young man who was about 20 years old and a little girl with long black hair.

The young man was wearing a leather frock coat and carrying a small bag.

His sincere features implied a good upbringing, but interestingly enough, he didn't seem ignorant of the ways of the world. One could feel the atmosphere of a well trained soldier in every one of his movements.

"Let's go, Dalian... It'll be time for the appointment soon."

Taking out an army-issued pocket watch, he called out to the girl.

The black-haired girl called Dalian looked expressionlessly up to him. And then said with a haughtiness that didn't fit her cute looks,

"Wait, Huey. I am still in the middle of my meal."

"In the middle of it? ...Do you still plan to eat more?"

The young man called Huey asked, a bit amazed. Lots of cleanly licked plates were already piled up in front of the girl. On the plate she was currently eating were things like fish and chips, meat pie and sugared, glossy fried bread.

Only fatty dishes which one could almost get heartburn from just by looking.

"Why do you need to ask such an obvious thing?"

However, Dalian pointed to the counter undisturbed, while biting into those dishes,

"This foolish pub offers an all-you-can-eat for their fried breads! The price is the same, thus it's overwhelmingly more profitable when I eat a lot. Are you so dense that you can't even do such simple math?"

"No, I know that much even without math..."

Huey sighed lightly. The black-haired girl looked up to him and said

"In that case, quickly bring me the next serving, you dunce."

"....."

While shaking his head, Huey stood up as ordered and walked towards the counter.

Noticing Huey's sour face, the host of the pub raised a doubtful eyebrow.

"An unfamiliar face. Are the two of you outsiders?"

"Yes. We just arrived on the previous train."

Huey smiled sociably. Looking around in the crowded pub, he added

"Quite lively in here. I expected this town to be a bit calmer."

A group of about fifteen men were yelling around all the time in the centre of the shop—a noisy bunch who seemed to be something like hunters or ex-soldiers.

The host looked at them bothered, and muttered in a soft tone, as if speaking to himself

"It is actually a calm town, you know. If it wasn't for the incident."

"...incident?"

Huey inclined his head. The host answered while cutting the roast beef in front of him,

"The Beast of Ashwell. Didn't you come because you've also heard of this rumour?"

"No. What is it about?"

Seemingly having aroused his interest, Huey leaned forward lightly.

The host took out a newspaper from a stack of them on the ground and presented it to him. A thin tabloid sized local paper. It was the last week's issue.

"It's big on the first page. A lawyer that opened his business in this town got murdered."

"A lawyer...?"

While looking through the creased newspaper, Huey narrowed his eyes. Ashwell was the name of the murdered lawyer. Leonard Ashwell. Age at death; 40 years.

"Mr. Ashwell was a famous barrister in this town, you see. He accepted cases for low prices, proceeded against corrupted policemen or sued landlords that abused tenant farmers... For us common folk, he was like a hero."

"This hero... was murdered?"

"Yeah," the host answered bluntly.

"Not just the lord. His wife and daughter were all murdered, too. I tell you, it was a cruel thing."

"...what about the culprit?" asked Huey.

"Huh?"

"Is it still unknown, who killed them? According to what you've just told me, he seemed to have many enemies."

"Ah, well yeah... Surely the bunch that shunned him wasn't all that small..."

The host said hazily. It was in a voice tired from lamenting.

"But we know who the culprit is. And there's the big problem."

"Who is it?"

"It's not a human. It's a beast."

"A beast?"

"I've heard it's taller than your common cow and looks like a wolf."

Huey kept quiet for a while and gazed at the bearded face of the host. Then he lost his focus and breathed out,

"Err... Can you tell me more about this?"

The host sighed deeply.

"A servant of the Ashwells witnessed it. How this beast killed the whole family, and in the end, escaped through the window after it ate a bit of them."

"For real...?"

Huey asked back, perplexed. The host nodded deeply,

"Well... The servant collapsed right after the police arrived and the thing about it being bigger than a cow probably is not true. But I also don't think it's all a lie, since there actually were corpses eroded by a beast. And there were also strands of hair and footprints."

"I see..."

Huey dropped his gaze to the newspaper. The contents of it were clearly substantiating the host's words.

"So the people gathered here are planning to hunt the beast?"

Huey asked, gazing at the main street, which one could see from the entrance of the pub.

There were about 4, 5 dogs, which looked like hunting dogs, fastened carelessly to the street light. And the long and narrow luggage several guests of the pub were carrying, were probably their hunting guns.

The host continued in an indifferent voice.

"Vengeance for the Lord... a lot of people got support from him, you see. Especially the townspeople involved with this damn provoking Hurston family..."

"Hurston family?"

Huey inclined his head once again. This name wasn't written in the newspaper.

The host nosed displeasedly.

"Didn't you notice when you arrived? This fucking big fertilizer factory."

"If you're talking about the building I could see from the window in the train..."

"Yeah, that's it. The city council member Roy Hurston is managing this factory, but this damn greenhorn fired about 500 workers half a year ago - unilateral, just because he brought in a new machine!"

"Dismissal? But what happened to the workers...?"

Huey asked in a serious voice. The host shrugged his shoulders bluntly,

"See, there's no other industry company in this town. It was awful. When they were on the edge of hanging themselves or becoming criminals, Mr. Ashwell came and rescued them."

"Rescued them....?"

"It's called 'class-action'. He stirred up the press and caused an uproar with this. It seems like he even got back support of the noble and wealthy people of the capital. Thanks to this, that Hurston greenhorn got severely criticized in court. Everyone was delighted when he won the lawsuit right in the first instance."

"I see," Huey nodded. Ashwell surely could be called a hero.

"And now the former employees want to avenge him...?"

"They seem to be planning to go on a mountain hunt together with the hunters and ex-servicemen that gathered from nearby. Some of them want to strike it rich by capturing this mysterious beast alive... I was sure that you'd also belong to this bunch. I mean, you've also been a soldier, right?"

"No... I was just a pilot."

Huey shook his head with a smile.

The host looked wonderingly at Huey.

"Hmm... If you're not aiming for the beast, then why did you come to this town...?"

Huey lightly stiffened his cheeks and nodded.

"Well... I have an appointment with an acquaintance of an acquaintance. This bread, I'll be taking this with me, all right?"

"U, Uuh...?"

Huey hurriedly wrapped up some fried bread in oil paper and walked away. The host gazed in wonder at him for a while. Huey pretended to not notice this and returned with fast steps to his table.

Dalian was already on watch for him with a bitter expression, embracing the sugar pot.

"You are late! How long does it take you to get some bread, you lame duck?"

Even before Huey could sit down, Dalian started berating him. Huey made a tired face and said,

"...let's go, Dalian."

The girl looked up, befuddled, and held out her hands covered with protectors.

"What are you talking about? I will be eating this fried bread now. Hurry up and hand it over."

"The family of your acquaintance seems to be pretty unpopular in this town... if they find out that our destination is the house of the Hurston's, then they'd probably cause quite an uproar."

Saying so, Huey started to put together their luggage. Seeing this, Dalian panicked. While standing up hurriedly, she reached out her hands and said,

"Hey Huey, why are you stowing the bread away? I've not put sugar on it yet. Huey!"

"It also seems better if we not search for a carriage nearby. It can't be helped... We'll have to walk for a bit."

"Hey! What are you doing? Let go of my hands. Where are you touching me? How lewd!"

Huey took the kicking and struggling little girl, almost like luggage, under his arms and left the shop.

Beholding the sugar pot left on the table woefully, Dalian muttered in a tearful voice,

"Sugar..."

Part 2

While the Hurston Family didn't hold a peerage, they were a gentry family with equal fortune and authority. They owned land

around the town and employed several tenant farmers. A lot of them also were working in important offices of the town, as judges or as committee members.

Their residence was a big mansion on a high ground with a view of the town.

There was a well maintained garden with flowers blooming in profusion and in the adjoining farm, expensive racehorses were grazing. The building itself was also impressive and let one feel the assets of the family.

There was just one thing ruining this scenery, which was a group of about 40 to 50 people encircling the front door of the mansion. It was a protest movement against the discharge of the factory employees.

Gazing at them through the window of the parlour, Huey sipped at his black tea with an uncomfortable expression. Dalian was sitting on a couch, absorbed in reading as she freely took books from a bookshelf in the mansion. She was expressionless as always, but looked amused in a way. When she could read a rare book, she was almost always in a good temper.

"Thank you for waiting."

Some time had passed, Huey's tea cup was already half-empty, when a tall man wearing an American sack suit was guided in by a butler and entered the room.

His age was likely in the midst of the twenties. He was a young man not so much older than Huey.

Seeing Huey looking back to him, the man tried to manage a vague smile. But then instantly seemed surprised and stopped.

Staring at Dalian who was wordlessly reading a book, he spoke, lightly bewildered,

"Err... are you the Black Biblioprincess?"

"....."

Dalian gradually noticed his existence and raised her face. The man smiled timidly while she scowled at him, on guard.

But his bewilderment was reasonable. This is because Dalian was a beauty that gave off the impression of a doll. Furthermore, her dress added to this with its enigma.

Cloth decorated with jet black laces. A skirt bulged up by several layers of frills. These outlines of her were enfolded by metallic protectors on the back of her hands and a rustic tasset.

Her looks made one think of the ceremonial robes of medieval knights; an odd mixture that couldn't be called dress or armour.

And finally, in place of a ribbon, she was wearing an old, metallic chest.

A big lock, tied to her with silver chains.

Even so, the man bowed politely to the black-dressed girl.

"Please forgive my rudeness. I wasn't expecting such a beautiful lady..."

The corners of Dalian's mouth twitched when she heard his words. If she was a cat, she'd surely be purring now, pleased.

For some reason Dalian gave Huey a triumphant sidelong glance and tugged at his sleeves. Then she muttered in a low voice,

"This greenhorn is quite promising. You ought to follow his example a bit."

Huey sighed amazed.

"Wasn't this a mere phrase of civility... ah..."

He got his shin kicked by Dalian's metallic boots and frowned.

The timidly smiling man beheld their giving and taking in confusion.

"Thank you for taking on this far journey... I'm relieved you arrived without problems."

Finally, he could pull himself together and said so.

He then shifted his glance in the direction of the front door of the mansion.

The workers gathered in front of the door were still hanging out banners across the street and were still raising protesting voices. There, some guts are needed in order to slip through the circle of this menacing crowd.

"Well, somehow."

Huey nodded with a bitter smile.

"But I pity the carriage driver who got hit with rotten eggs."

"Is that so..."

The man sighed.

"I will provide this driver with a servant later, as an apology."

"...this group seems to consist of the workers discharged by the factory, right?"

Huey asked nonchalantly.

The man cast down his eyes sentimentally.

"Yes. The protest movement settled down a bit after the judgment at the first instance, but since a few days ago it's like this again... do you already know about the barrister Ashwell?"

"I've heard about it underway from the host of a pub we went to ... a beast has attacked him?"

"W-Well yes... such rumours also seem to be in circulation..."

The man's voice trembled.

"With the death of their barrister, the judgments from now on are in the wind. I think that's also a reason why the former employees of the factory grew wild now. I just hope my brother recognizes that they do have lives and families to protect."

"By 'brother' you mean...?"

"Aah, I forgot to mention this. My name's Chez Hurston. The head of the factory is my older brother, Roy Hurston."

Again with a timid smile, the man held out his right hand.

"My name is Hugh Anthony Disward - you may call me Huey. And she's Dalian."

With these words, Huey grasped back his hand. Then suddenly, he seemed to have come upon something unexpected.

He noticed that the palm of Chez' hand was solid and trained, although he looked very timid.

Rather than the son of a rich gentry family, this seemed to be the palm of a coachman or groom, who fosters horses.

"Er... I've heard you came to meet grandfather... forgive my rudeness, but what kind of business...?"

Chez didn't notice Huey's bewilderment and asked so reluctantly.

Not Huey, but Dalian answered to this question.

"We came to hand over a book. The old Phantom Book we were entrusted with by your ancestors."

"Phantom Book...?"

Chez inclined his head. Dalian gazed at him expressionlessly.

"I've heard it's considered to be the proof of the current head of the family."

"Is that so? ...I see. So grandfather is..."

Chez muttered, comprehending something.

It was right after this, that rude footsteps could be heard from the corridor and the door to the parlor opened violently.

Part 3

"Chez...! Is Chez here?!"

A stern-looking man with sharp eyes entered the parlour.

He looked around arrogantly in the room and seemed obviously displeased when he noticed Huey and Dalian.

"Brother."

Chez moaned weakly.

Huey and Dalian compared the two of them with their eyes wordlessly.

Apparently, the man, who was called 'brother' by Chez, seemed to be the city council member Roy Hurston.

His age was likely in the latter half of his twenties. He could probably be classified as a young public official. He was just about 4 or 5 years older than Chez.

However, the impressions of those brothers were quite different. The appearance of the younger brother was helpless, but polite and gentle, whilst the older brother was brimming with self-confidence and haughtiness. In a sense, their relation was obvious.

"What is this bunch outside the mansion? Didn't I tell you to drive away these riffraff?"

Roy rebuked his younger brother without restraint in front of Huey and Dalian's eyes.

Chez chewed his words,

"But look, brother. They aren't trying to do us any harm. They just seek an employment and hence wish to discuss this matter with you once again. So please..."

"So what?"

Roy asked him back in an arrogant voice.

"Don't make me laugh. There's nothing to discuss with those lower classes. What a waste of time."

"...isn't it this one-sided attitude of yours that makes them revolt like this?"

"Don't be absurd. Are you telling me to bow my head to those lowlifes out there?"

"What nonsense," Roy added, muttering as if to spit.

"To begin with, wasn't their incapability the reason they failed keeping a job? Why should I, Roy Hurston, bear responsibility for this? Listen Chez, the ability of us humans isn't equal. Superior people have a role appropriate to their ability and incapable people aren't allowed to hinder them."

"Even so, suddenly dismissing them is going too far! Didn't they all expend great effort for the factory up to now?"

Chez tried desperately to convince his brother.

But Roy just looked down on him with a cold gaze,

"However much effort incapable people do expend, they cannot win against a person with true ability. Aren't you, more than anyone else, aware of this fact, Chez?"

The younger brother hung his head powerlessly to the mocking words of his brother.

Chez looked down miserably, but Roy didn't care and asked him rudely,

"By the way... who are those guys?"

Roy gazed suspiciously at Huey and Dalian.

"They are our guests! The two of them came to meet grandfather... Sir Disward and Miss Dalian."

Chez said to his brother in a reproving voice.

A light astonishment skimmed over Roy's face.

"...Sir Disward? A relative of Wesley Disward?"

"Pleased to meet you."

Huey smiled uncomfortably. He stood up and greeted him politely.

When he recognized that the out-of-place looking guests were related to a noble family, Roy changed his attitude abruptly. He drew near as if they were intimate and smiled unnaturally.

"Welcome, Sir Disward! I am Roy Hurston."

"I've heard you are a member of the city council? You seem to be a very busy person!"

A bit of cynicism was mixed in Huey's words, but Roy nodded exaggeratedly.

"You see, the Hurston family is a personage in this town. So we have to do reputable work."

Then he turned around to his younger brother,

"Are you planning to lead them to grandfather's room hereafter?"

"Yes, that's what I thought..."

Chez answered in a subdued voice.

"Got it. I shall accompany you."

Roy said so, interrupting his brother.

"Pointless..."

A hoarse voice could be heard from behind Roy.

An old man escorted by servants arrived on a wheelchair with creaking metallic wheels. He looked terribly pale.

"This won't be... necessary... Roy."

"Grandfather?"

Roy turned around to him surprised, while Chez rushed over to the old man hurriedly.

"Grandfather... what about your health? Please don't overdo things..."

"I'm fine, Chez..."

The old man said, in a cracking voice resembling a rusty gear.

"It is against good manners to invite the Biblioprincess to our house and then summon her to my bedroom..."

Dalian stepped up to the old man.

She elegantly spread the sleeves of her jet black dress, stopped and then proclaimed with a face as expressionless as the one of a doll. Her voice seemed lonesome in a way.

"You've gotten old... Haven't you, Boyd Hurston?"

A smile floated over the stale cheeks of the old man. He kissed her hand that was covered with a metallic protector.

"You are without change, Black Biblioprincess... I am truly grateful... that you've come to grant my wish."

Dalian nodded silently.

"Based on an old contract, I've come to hand out a book. The Phantom Book sealed by your ancestor in the distant past... 'The Pedigree of All Creation'."

Upon the words of the black-dressed girl, Roy's look became grim.

"Phantom Book...? Grandfather, what does this...?"

The old man raised his face clumsily and turned his glance towards his two grandchildren.

"It's an ancient book... the new head of the Hurston family is allowed to read it only once in his entire life. The proof of the present head of... our family."

"So that means... you've called them today because..."

"You two should be aware of this... but I won't last... so long any more. It's something... I have to pass on to the new head before I leave this world..."

When the old man spoke so far, he started to cough violently. He coughed up blood during his fit, but it didn't seem to be calming down.

"Grandfather...!"

Chez patted the back of the old man. In the meanwhile, a servant poured out water from a water jar and presented it to him. The old man grabbed the glass with trembling fingers.

"Tonight... come to my room before the date changes... there... I shall conduct the inheritance... is this all right for you... Black Biblioprincess?"

The old man asked, while breathing painfully.

Dalian proclaimed without a single change in her expression.

"I've heard your wish."

Part 4

Huey and Dalian decided to spend the rest of the time until sunset in the garden, since the parlour was a bit noisy due to the protest movement. The garden was far more beautiful than it seemed from afar; countless roses were in fullness of bloom inside the lovely manicured flower beds.

However, Dalian didn't rejoice at this view, but instead sat down on the bench at the bower and continued to read a thick book wordlessly. Huey didn't seem to mind and, while yawning, shifted his gaze to the meadow in which a water fountain was positioned.

Chez could be seen on the meadow. He rolled around in the grass and frolicked around with several puppies. Apparently, he had let out the hunting dog puppies they were raising in the dog kennel of the mansion in order to look after them.

"Dogs... I see, so he's looking after the dogs..."

Huey murmured so, looking at Chez cheerfully frolicking around with the dogs. He had remembered the solid and trained palm of Chez's hand when they did a handshake.

It was unlikely, that this could come just from playing around with the dogs. It could be said for sure, that he was always looking after them with a lot of enthusiasm.

"The Hurston family originally earned most of their fortune by breeding hunting dogs. Even the Royal dog kennel is taking in some dogs that were raised here."

Dalian said, disinterestedly without looking up from her book.

"Aah, I see... there are quite a few dog lovers, even in noble and royal families. I guess dogs raised by a famous breeder are purchased for unbelievably high prices."

Chez seemed to have noticed Huey's glance and waved his hand, embarrassed. Then he came towards the bower together with the puppies.

Seeing this, Dalian contorted her face. She closed her book and sneaked to the back of the bench.

The puppies followed behind Chez in order and, when he stopped, they laid down as if to join up with him. It was an impressive relationship of mutual trust. One could see that this didn't just result from good training; the puppies also adored him.

"They seem pretty attached to you."

Huey said in admiration.

Chez shook his head, troubled, while blushing.

"This is because I was looking after them since I was young."

The speckled hunting dog puppies looked like stuffed toys and seemed extremely cuddlesome. He kneeled down to the puppies looking up to him and stroked their back.

"Dalian, don't you want to try touching them, too? ...Dalian?"

Huey turned around still holding a puppy in his arms and was stunned.

The black-dressed girl had hidden herself behind a post of the bower and peeked out with caution. On top of that, she held the thick book she read before in front of her like a shield.

Huey asked in a lightly amazed voice,

"...what are you doing there, Dalian?"

"Do not worry about it. I am now interested in this flower."

Dalian said so with feigned ignorance and observed forcedly the rose bed in front of her. She was clearly acting unnaturally. Huey now seemed to try to refrain from laughing,

"Don't tell me, you're afraid, of dogs?"

"What...?!"

Dalian's smooth white cheeks blushed crimson. Then she added in an unnatural voice with no intonation,

"W-What are you saying? Why should I be afraid of such a wild beast who can't even read letters right? H-How foolish."

"....."

Huey stood up wordlessly, still holding the puppy in his arms and slowly neared Dalian. Then he let the dog down on the ground.

Dalian seemed to draw the young hunting dog's interest by her stare, so the dog wagged his tail joyfully and came running to her in full speed.

"I-iih?!"

Dalian shrieked effeminately. Because she froze on the spot in fear, she couldn't even escape.

"Hey, what are you doing you pooch? Stop it. I am not tasty!"



The black-dressed girl stumbled when her legs got tangled and ended up with the book and the dog on her while she waved her hands and feet about. Dalian's face was blue and contorted, but from afar it looked like she was joyfully frolicking around.

Huey's shoulders were trembling while he tried desperately to refrain from laughing, but Chez couldn't overlook this scene and so approached Dalian and pulled the puppy apart.

"Forgive me. Are you alright?"

Chez asked caringly, upon which Dalian nodded awkwardly.

"Haa... haa... t-this will have consequences, Huey..."

She said so to him while catching her breath, looking up at him resentfully. Then, at last, Huey couldn't suppress it anymore and started to laugh out loud.

"E-Excuse me... I will now take them for a walk..."

After he bowed down several times, Chez left, taking the dogs with him.

There was, however, a person that approached them in place of him. Roy.

The eldest son of the Hurston family gave his brother, who was laughing innocently, surrounded by the dogs, a dirty look.

"Geez...! I guess he is beyond hope. Playing around with dogs in his age."

He said so with a criticizing tone.

Huey looked up to his face in profile, seemingly surprised.

"You don't assist in raising the dogs, Roy Hurston?"

Roy shrugged his shoulders with a smile.

"Of course I am assisting, too. But only in the shape of work. It doesn't suffice to just pamper them. There's also the need to cast away useless dogs with no mercy. My stupid younger brother doesn't seem to understand this. Do you know the difference between superior and inferior dogs?"

"No... what is it?"

"It's the lineage."

Roy smirked, raising the corners of his mouth.

"A dog that inherited the blood of superior parents will gain even more superior abilities. Furthermore, he will leave even more superior blood when he is mated with an excellent dog of the opposite sex. This is the foundation of breeding. A superior individual is from birth different from others. It's the same for humans."

"Humans as well?"

"Yes. To tell the truth, I'm not blood related with grandfather. The same applies for Chez."

Huey scowled upon Roy's sudden revelation. But Roy added in a proud voice,

"Grandfather looked for men and women with an excellent lineage, paired them and raised their children as his grandchildren in order to bequeath a more superior lineage to the Hurston family."

"...so you don't know your true parents?"

Huey asked reluctantly and expressionless.

"Right. But I'm thankful to grandfather! Thanks to him I was born with superior abilities than others. I'm able to achieve better results than others with the same effort and am successful in business. Grandfather's decision was correct. But then there seem to be exceptions."

"Exceptions?"

Roy pointed with a scoffing and bitter smile as Huey inclined his head.

"Just look at Chez! Even when you cross breed two excellent racehorses - it's possible that a useless horse, that can't even run right, gets born. Even the most superior breeder produces failures. That's what I'm trying to say."

One could not see any hatred or ill will in the face of Roy when he spat out these sharp words. He was just stating what he considered to be facts.

"I've already heard about 'The Pedigree of All Creation' before."

Roy shot a glance at Dalian, who started to read her book again.

"A Phantom Book that covers all the characteristics to figure out which lineages to pair in order to produce excellent descendants... it's probably thanks to this book that the Hurston family succeeded in breeding. It certainly can be considered to be the proof of the present head of our family."

Huey kept silent and nodded.

Crops, gardening plants, hunting dogs, pets, racehorses - countless people are continuously conducting selective breeding or mating in order to obtain better individuals. And the profit the succeeding ones can gain is immense. Producers of superior racehorses can earn unbelievable amounts of money just with the mating fees for their horses.

However, it's about living beings.

There's no warranty that the descendants of superior parents will be superior, too. For one, there are the compatibility and 'hit or miss' issues. And it's also very well possible that the children only inherit the weaknesses of their parents.

But if there was a way to know the results of mating pairs in advance... then this could be seen as a certain wealth. It would be like a dream for people living from breeding.

At the same time, this would mean something dreadful.

Reliably producing superior tribes also means the destruction of tribes which aren't.

This was probably the reason 'The Pedigree of All Creation' has been sealed away.

As a Phantom Book containing forbidden knowledge, that should not exist in this world---

The head of the Hurston family is the only chosen one allowed to read it once in a lifetime.

"So you think you're going to inherit it?"

Huey asked Roy.

"Of course. There isn't anyone else with the qualifications."

Roy said so, without hesitation. It was no bluff. He was full of pure confidence.

He suddenly narrowed his eyes in displeasure.

Two men, looking like guests, were walking on a corridor in the mansion. Roy had noticed that. The two of them were wearing the same type of coat and radiated a kind of authority.

"Excuse me. It seems the Police have come again."

Roy said so, glancing at them with evil eyes. Huey seemed suspicious.

"Police?"

"To obtain information. Recently there was an incident of a lawyer's family getting massacred. There is a bunch that is slandering us with their unfounded rumours."

Huey looked at him sceptically.

"It seems the man that got murdered fought against you at court , right?"

"Right. It's a real bother. Thanks to this we're now suspected even after he was bitten to death. See, there are even absurd rumours of a giant beast at the scene of the crime..."

Roy didn't seem to care much and smirked.

"Well, we let them investigate the mansion until they've got enough. However much they search, I don't think they'll find a monster wolf of the size of a cow."

Roy left with these words and Huey gazed for a while after him silently. Then, at once, he seemed to have recalled something and turned around to the black-dressed girl.

Dalian was taking a break from reading and absent-mindedly stared at a flower bed.

The fence was decorated with lovely ornaments and the tendrils of blue roses in bloom were twined around it.

"Blue roses...? Very pretty."

Huey spoke to Dalian after having watched her admiring the roses as if it was something out of the common.

"Do you know the blue rose's meaning in the language of flowers, Huey?"

Dalian opened her mouth and said so bluntly without moving a muscle. Huey shook his head,

"No, can you tell me?"

"Unattainable goal... or attaining the impossible."

"...attaining the impossible?"

"Blue pigments do not exist in roses to begin with. Whatever cultivar you combine, it is, strictly speaking, impossible to create a blue rose."

"Impossible you say... but what's this then?"

Huey touched the roses, surprised. Admittedly the colour was unusual, but they were definitely roses. Layers of lovely petals and thorns on the tendrils.

Dalian nodded restfully.

"They are roses. However, their genes were recombined and the function of another plant was implanted that produces blue pigments. It's an artificial rose---"

"The genes...? It's possible to do this...?"

"It's impossible with the knowledge and technology of the current age. But if there is something that can grant this knowledge to mankind---"

"The Phantom Books that should not exist in this world... I guess?"

Huey sighed deeply.

"Correct. This is the forbidden knowledge the owner of 'The Pedigree of All Creation' can obtain."

Dalian murmured so, and cast down her eyes.

Huey seemed to have noticed something and raised his face.

"Dalian... if someone with this knowledge is able to produce such roses, can he also create monsters that shouldn't originally

exist? For example, an improved hunting dog of the size of a cow and resembling a wolf. This would be..."

"Correct. Probably..."

Dalian answered as quickly as a shot. Apparently, she thought the same thing.

"But who would do such a thing?"

"Eh?"

"The only living person that has read 'The Pedigree of All Creation' is Boyd Hurston. Even if he could create such a giant monster, this old man wouldn't be able to take it to the outside or to train it. If there's one who could do the job..."

"Chez... but he doesn't have a motive to let this beast attack the barrister Ashwell."

Huey held his chin and moaned.

"The one having a motive is the older brother, Roy. But does such a busy person have the time to tame such a monster...? To begin with, how to raise a beast of a cow's size unseen? And where to hide it? Locking it up would be too conspicuous."

"So... do you think the Hurston family has nothing to do with the beast of Ashwell, Dalian?"

Huey muttered in a somehow taken aback voice.

Dalian kept silent for a while, but then answered,

"We will talk about this later, Huey."

She said so suddenly, in an urging voice.

One could see sweat appearing on her smooth doll-like face. Seemingly feeling danger, Dalian turned around, embracing her book,

"Grh... the escape route has been blocked."

She distorted her well-formed lips and moaned weakly.

Dogs were obstructing her path.

They were puppies on a level even smaller than the ones Chez took with him before. Two similar spaniels were drawing near from both sides, wagging their short tails.

The black-dressed girl backed off slowly, but tripped over the edge of the flower bed and fell face up.

The puppies seemed to misunderstand this as a signal to play and jumped joyfully towards her.

"Hey, what are you doing? Stop it... Ah! This place is no good. Don't lick there... the book, no, the book is no good! Incorrect!"

Dalian's cries resounded in the garden at evening.

Part 5

Late at night. Huey and Dalian were guided to an annex of the mansion.

The building was made of old limestone and made one feel the history of the Hurston family. This dark gray building seemed to be the current residence of the present head Boyd.

"Ah, you've come..."

Boyd saw Dalian arriving and muttered so contentedly.

Other than he, only the brothers Chez and Roy were in the old man's workroom. There were no butlers, nor were there any servants.

"Thank you for waiting."

The black-dressed girl proclaimed calmly.

She was carrying an old book under her arm.

But it was not one of the books she freely took out from the mansion. A leather cover that had grown stale. The binding was splendidly decorated with gold. And then the crest engraved into the book. 'The Pedigree of All Creation' - this was its title.

"Ooh... this is exactly... like then..."

The old man reached out his bony hands but then desisted from doing so and stopped his movements.

Phantom Books grant their readers access to forbidden knowledge. But if someone is possessing one of them for a too long a time, it will bring various distortions to this world. This tendency is even more severe when someone other than the proper owner is taking it into the hands. He knows about this. The old man is not the owner of the Phantom Book any more.

"Grandfather... the inheritance of the status of the present head is all well and good, but wouldn't it be better to call a public notary ? And why on earth in such a room...?"

Roy spoke in a lightly irritated voice. He was probably displeased about not knowing his grandfather's real intention.

However, the old man ignored Roy's question,

"May you open this door, Sir Disward?"

Huey grabbed for the knob of the door inside the workroom as commanded.

The thick metallic door opened with a creaking sound. Beyond was a stairway leading to the underground.

"What is this...?!"

One could hear Roy's gasp. Also Chez was opening his eyes wide.

The stairs didn't reach so wide. The room wasn't completely underground, but rather was like a secret chamber of which one half was buried in the ground. Compared to the other rooms of the mansion, this one was about half of their size.

On one side of the windowless room, unfamiliar chemicals were tidily lined up.

The room was filled with countless experimenting utensils like test tubes and microscopes. It looked more like the laboratory of a hospital or university, than the workroom of a gentry family.

Roy groaned when he looked around in the room while walking down the stairs with an oil lamp in his hand.

"I never would have guessed that there's such an establishment under the annex... what is all this, Grandfather?"

"A room built using the knowledge granted by the 'The Pedigree of All Creation'... it's a room for forbidden secret ceremonies."

Boyd Hurston answered with a faint smile.

Chez was the one carrying the old man. He lifted his grandfather up together with the wheelchair and walked down the stairs carefully. He was stronger than he looked with his slender body.

"Nostalgic...isn't it...? Roy, Chez..."

The old man said so, cryptically. The two brothers looked at each other sceptically.

"It's the place you two were brought forth!"

"The place we were brought forth...? What do you mean, grandfather?"

Roy glared offended at the old man.

The old man cackled,

"Our family is in contact with the Royal Family through their dog kennel... you know that, right...?"

"Yes, of course. This is because the dogs raised by us are exceptional."

Roy puffed up with pride. "Mhm", the old man nodded.

"We weren't only instructed... to breed dogs..."

"...that is to say...?"

"It's about a secret contract concluded during the... epoch of the former Queen... it was right after the war at the peninsula in the last century. It has been already more than sixty years ago..."

The old man closed his eyes to follow his memory.

In the epoch of the former Queen, the kingdom sent out its army to the European continent to fight against Russia together

with other countries like France or Turkey. It was known as one of the most idiotic fights in history. It cost a giant amount in war expenditures and in lives of countless soldiers, but the countries did not attain a single thing. It was indeed a foolish war.

And it's known that the troops of the Kingdom used combat dogs on the battlefield.

It's rather natural that the Royal Family contacted the Hurston family in that epoch, since they were famous as outstanding breeders.

"Her Majesty grieved... over the great loss of... this country's soldiers. The chamberlain couldn't let pass her sorrow unnoticed and... consulted me. He asked if it isn't possible to bring forth... better and better soldiers like it is with dogs... a new kind of human... with superior abilities... and who survive any battlefield however cruel..."

"Bring forth... a new kind of human...?"

Roy said in an unstrung voice. Chez' shoulders were trembling in fright.

The flame in the lamp produced a dark shadow on the face of the old man.

"When I inherited the status of the present head of the Hurston family... and learned about the existence of 'The Pedigree of All

Creation'... I noticed. I noticed that I could grant the wish of the Queen... using the knowledge of this Phantom Book. That's why I... built this establishment."

Roy swallowed his saliva.

"So... in this room..."

"Using the knowledge written in the Phantom Book... I examined the genes of thousands of fellow countrymen... and produced your parents. They, who were born with superior abilities,... were adopted by the people who lost their children in the war and became splendid adults."

A mad smile floated over his face.

"So I considered them to be the first generation of the new human... and went on to produce the second one... by once more revising the genes of your already superior parents... a new kind of human that has the abilities to act as the perfect soldier... the successor of the Hurston family..."

The long monologue of the old man ended. Then,

"Wonderful...!"

Roy extended his arms and looked up to the ceiling. His whole body was shivering in deep emotion.

"So this is I, Roy Hurston! An improved new kind of human, born as a superior species...!"

However, the old man interrupted him with his hoarse voice.

"Oh no... Roy... it's not you."

Roy was still looking up to the ceiling, but a puzzled expression spread over his face.

"...what?"

"You didn't inherit... the new characteristic... I seeked for..."

Upon the cold words of his grandfather, Roy's appearance became nervous.

"What are you saying... Grandfather?! Aren't these superior abilities of mine the proof of a new kind of human?"

Roy drew nervously closer, but the old man didn't even think of answering him any more.

"The one appropriate for being the head of the Hurston family... my successor... is you... Chez."

The old man turned around. The face of the usually timidly smiling young man who pushed the wheelchair stiffened.

Roy was beside himself and pointed at his younger brother,

"How absurd... Grandfather, are you telling me I am inferior to someone like Chez?! There's no way such an absurd thing could be!"

"You're... merely a common human who's a bit clever. You aren't something along the lines of a new kind of human."

The old man spoke mercilessly.

"Roy... you're just a failed product."

Roy was dazed and stood stock still there.

"Failed work... I am... just a failed product...?!"

Roy muttered the harsh words of his grandfather and went on retreating to the wall.

Underway, his leg got caught in a rack, he fell down, got buried in test tubes and bottles of chemicals, and finally sank down to the floor. After he gazed, dumbfounded, at the old man, he started to weep.

The fact that the brother he once looked down upon, snatched away the status as head of the family, knocked him down to such an extent.

Chez averted his gaze from his brother and glared rebukingly at the old man instead.

"Please wait, Grandfather. There's no way I'm suitable for the..."

"Don't play dumb... it's futile, Chez... I know you better... than anyone other. The characteristic of the new mankind I was seeking for by crossbreeding is the ability you're trying to hide so desperately..."

Chez' back quaked heavily. Hugging his own shoulder in fright, he stepped one step back. The old man reached out his hand as if to tempt him,

"Well then, Chez... now accept the Phantom Book... and then spread your kindred over the entire country! This is your role. It's an honour granted to you by us, the Hurston family!"

"No..."

Chez interrupted his excited grandfather in a timid voice.

"Chez?"

The old man opened his mouth, surprised.

"I do not desire such things like a Phantom Book or forbidden knowledge... this is just playing with life and death!"

"What...? What are you saying, Chez? You, the one and only success..."

"Success and failure in existence...? You don't have the right to decide over that. And even more so, you don't have the right to forsake a failed work like trash."

Chez ground his teeth.

"I admit that talent isn't allotted equally to the humans. However, there's no one who's superior in every aspect compared to the others! A breed of dog that was brought forth through an

array of unreasonable crossbreeding might have outstanding abilities. But they do also have at least a big weakness in another aspect."

"Wait... Chez... listen to me..."

The old man spoke in dismay. However, Chez just shook his head with a gentle smile.

"Won't we end with all this about the head of the family, Grandfather...? Like up to now, brother can take care of the factory and the mansion, and I will continue to take care of the dogs..."

"Chez...!"

The old man was persisting on his wish, and his grandchild was trying to persuade him.

Huey was wordlessly watching their fierce argument.

Dalian was looking down to the Phantom Book in her arms and seemed bored. However, suddenly, a slight disturbance could be seen in her eyes.

A faint light shone through the closed Phantom Book in the dark underground room. The Phantom Book was emitting magical power.

"Dalian...?"

Noticing this abnormality, Huey turned around. Then his face contorted with surprise.

"Lie down, Dalian---!"

"Huh?!"

Taking the black-dressed girl with him, Huey tumbled down on the floor with great vigour.

Right after this, an intense intent to kill shot past over their heads.

A gunshot resounded in the underground room. Sparks scattered within the darkness and the smell of gunpowder spread out.

"Brother?!"

Chez shouted in a shrill voice.

Roy had stood up, and was swaying. He threw the oil lamp to the ground, took out the handgun he had been hiding, and aimed.

"Chez..."

A distorted voice leaked out from Roy's mouth.

"Did you think I'd rejoice on such a conclusion, Chez...? Living on as a failed work while asking for your sympathy...?"

Chez was short before crying, but even so he desperately raised his voice,

"Please wait, brother... I didn't...!"

"Shut up!!!"

Roy pulled the trigger without hesitation. A white light flashed in the dark.

"Ghuh...!"

It was the old man on the wheelchair who collapsed forward with a suppressed moan. A darkish stain was spreading out around the spot where the chest was shot and blood flooded out of his mouth.

"HAHAHA! What a ludicrous appearance. This is the sin for calling me a failed work. Atone with your life, you old crock!"

Roy raised a bright laugh.

Chez grew pale and embraced the convulsing body of his grandfather.

"Brother... what have you done...?"

"Be quiet... this girl comes next. Phantom Book? Biblioprincess? My arse!"

After turning around, Roy pointed his gun at Dalian.

"Ugh!"

Huey protected her by standing in front of her and took out his own handgun. It was a big calibre army-issue revolver. However, Roy had already set his gun and hence was faster. Huey didn't seem to make it in time.

The moment this thought came to mind---

"Stop it!"

Chez jumped in between them. In a posture to protect Huey and Dalian, he took the bullet his brother had shot. One bullet, two bullets---

"Chez!"

Eventually, Huey's handgun spouted fire before Roy could execute his third shot. And his bullet hit the wrist of the hand Roy was using to hold his gun, with an exact flight route.

Roy gave a shriek like an animal. His right arm started to dangle powerlessly, upon which his blood-stained handgun fell down.

"M...My arm... ghu... you mongrel... to shoot my arm...!"

"Don't move, Roy Hurston."

Huey set again his gun and warned him with sharp words. Roy's grim mien distorted on this disgrace.

Huey looked around while retaining the grip on his gun without negligence.

The fire of the lamp Roy had dropped spread its fire on the carpet and illuminated the small underground room with a bright light.

The old man had already passed away, but Chez was still breathing. With first-aid treatment, he might still make it. However, I have to first tie up Roy--- when Huey thought so and was about to walk away;

"Step back, Huey!"

Dalian shouted in a voice resembling a scream.

At the same time, an intense stench struck his nose. The spreading fire had inflamed the chemicals stored in this underground room. The moment Huey took notice of this, a bright flash followed by a terrific blast came rushing towards them, upon which their field of vision was enveloped in darkness.

Part 6

It looked like Huey didn't lose consciousness for too long.

His sleep was broken due to someone slapping his cheeks roughly.

"Hey, Huey! How long do you plan to sleep? You three-toed sloth! Is losing consciousness your one and only skill? Just how incapable are you?"

While swinging her long black hair around, she continued to slap his cheeks with the palm of her hand. Although her words were rude, she sounded desperate in a sense and her eyes seemed ready to overflow with tears at any moment.

"This kinda hurts... Dalian..."

Huey caught her arms when she was about to slap him all the more and raised his body restfully. Holding his still hazy head, he went on checking the damage caused by the explosion.

The condition of the underground room was terrible.

A conflagration was somehow averted, but due to the blast wave, the pillars sustaining the ceiling collapsed and thus the room was partially destroyed.

The corpse of the old man was squashed along with his wheelchair below by the ceiling and Roy could not be seen anywhere.

It was almost odd that Huey and Dalian were still living.

"That's..."

Huey set his handgun reflexively.

A beast was standing in the dark.

It had golden eyes like a nocturnal carnivore. A sharp nose and sharp teeth lined his mouth.

Its body was covered by bristles, hard like armour, with strongly developed muscles— altogether, it was more than twice as big as Huey.

A beast of the size of a cow and resembling a wolf---

It was the Beast of Ashwell without a doubt. The beast that was said to be seen at the scene where the barrister was murdered.

However, it was Dalian who stepped in front of Huey's gun.

"Wait, Huey! You mustn't shoot!"

The black-dressed girl spread her arms in order to protect the beast.

Seeing this, Huey finally noticed.

The beast didn't attack Dalian. It was the opposite. The beast was sustaining the collapsed ceiling with its back and tried to save them from being buried alive.

Then, Huey saw the scraps of cloth winded round the lower half of the beast's body and distorted his face.

It was a well-tailored American sack suit. The suit Chez was wearing until right before.

"You are... Chez Hurston...? This appearance..."

Huey easefully took down his gun and Dalian turned around expressionlessly.

The giant creature, once called Chez Hurston, breathed through its split mouth.

"I've always... thought it was strange... my appearance... my body..."

The words of the creature were distorted and thus hard to understand, but it was Chez' voice without doubt. It narrowed its eyes in self derision,

"But I understood through Grandfather's explanation just now... I am an improved breed brought forth by the hands of Grandfather... by recombining human genes and by crossbreeding experiments..."

Tears overflowed the golden eyes of Chez. Huey and Dalian didn't say anything and watched him lamenting. Beasts do not sob. Only humans shed tears in sadness.

"The perfect soldier that survives any battlefield... is THIS the answer brought forth by the knowledge of this PHANTOM BOOK ?! Is THIS the shape of the new mankind Grandfather sought---?!"

The creature shouted out. Fresh blood flowed out of his mouth. As Chez staggered, some of the bricks he was sustaining crumbled down.

Chez was shot by Roy. It was a deep wound; a common human would probably have died.

His body might be especially tough because of him being such a creature, but it didn't change the fact that he was sustaining a great number of bricks with this body in order to protect them. It didn't look like he could endure this for too long.

Huey bit on his lips and looked up to the bricks above him.

However, there was no gap big enough for a human to slip through. And if he moved the bricks badly, then everything could lose its balance and eventually even the small space sustained by Chez would disappear.

Chez raised his face with a gasp, seeming to have smelled something.

Huey and Dalian recognized this smell immediately as well. It was gasoline.

A blood-stained wounded man came carrying a gasoline can and poured its contents over the destroyed underground room.

It was Roy who contorted his face with hatred and poured gasoline over them.

And in his hand, he was holding a lighter. Roy was able slip out of the room one step ahead of them and was now about to set a fire above the bricks to bake them alive, buried in this room.

"Ugh... Brother... don't tell me..."

The creature gave off a voice in despair.

Roy ignited the lighter in his clumsy left hand.

The flame illuminated his terribly distorted face. When Roy was about to throw the ignited lighter---

"Huey. I grant you the right to open the gate."

Dalian proclaimed in a calm voice.

She reached her finger out for her collar and opened the dress around her chest wide.

A slender collarbone with smooth white skin was exposed. Buried in there was a lock. An unrefined old lock. It was tied by silver chains to a black leather collar and buried in the midst of the breast of the girl that was lacking roundings.

"....."

Huey raised his right hand wordlessly.

In his hand, he held a key. A golden key with a red gem embedded.

Ancient letters were engraved into it.

Huey read them aloud calmly.

Like a knight pledging allegiance to his princess. Or like a magician casting a spell---

"I ask of thee... Art thou mankind?"

Dalian answered to his call.

In a cold robotic voice, like an utensil.

『No. We art the Realm -- the Endless Realm within thine Vessel.

It was in the same moment, that the young man inserted the gold key into the lock before her breast, and that Roy threw his lighter away.

A tremendous flash filled the underground room and flames blazed up the dark.

Part 7

Roy Hurston kept guffawing while he looked down on the remains of the burned and crumbled underground room.

This laugh suddenly stopped.

He felt something behind him, turned around and then saw them.

Blue rose petals were dancing in the light of the deep crimson moon that reflected the flames.

Enveloped by these petals was a young man carrying an unfamiliar book, a black haired girl wearing an opened black dress, and finally, a beast resembling a wolf.

"This is absurd... how can you..."

Roy screamed out from the depths of his lungs.

"Why?! How did you escape?! There wasn't any hole big enough to slip through!"

"I'm sorry, but you know... **Phantom Books that open the gate to another world** aren't that rare."

The young man - Huey - muttered so, and closed the book he was holding silently.

There was not even any significance in Roy knowing that this was one of the Phantom Books that should not exist in this world. That this was the grimoire left behind by a magician who worshipped a god, called 'The God from the Exterior', who lives in the cracks to other dimensions.

"You are the one who killed the barrister Ashwell, aren't you? Roy Hurston."

Dalian said so in an indifferent voice while gazing at the baffled Roy.

"What are you saying at this hour...?"

Roy laughed dryly. He triumphantly glared at the creature behind the girl.

"Look at this disgusting appearance of Chez! Can't you see that this is the monster that was seen in Ashwell's mansion? This MONSTER!"

"The monster here is this twisted heart of yours."

Dalian declared coldly.

"What...?!"

"When we talked with you in the garden, you said that Ashwell got **bitten to death**. But you labelled the giant beast at the scene of crime as 'absurd rumour'."

Roy was dumbfounded and opened his eyes wide. His face spoke volumes. He couldn't even now believe what he had blurted out.

"So you knew it, Roy... that not a giant beast bit the Ashwells to death, but trained combat dogs."

Huey continued Dalian's words.

"There are only few in this town who wished for Ashwell's death. And it shouldn't be hard to run across you, if one investigates about people who train combat dogs here. Chez tried

to stop you. I guess he had to transform in order to sneak into the mansion... or... to cover for his brother, you..."

After he listened to Huey's explanation, his face distorted into a weird smile while crying.

The younger brother he looked down on had secretly covered for him. He noticed this fact.

"Yeah, that's right... I was the one who killed Ashwell by taking some dogs with me. Originally, I was planning to pin the murder on the stray dogs, but... I never thought this would make such a fuss."

Roy put his hand into the pocket of his coat and took out a knife he had hidden there. It was a large knife the gentry used for duels.

"And now, I'm also not able to talk my way out of the murder of Grandfather. I see, so I really was just a failed work. A disgusting beast had built its nest inside my heart."

Roy kept glaring at them and concentrated power in the hand he was holding the knife. Seeing this, Chez jumped out,

"Stop it... Brother!"

With agility beyond belief, the creature landed in front of Roy.

But Roy was faster. He put the blade on his throat and sliced it at a stroke.

Chez screamed out. Fresh blood splattered out from Roy's body, upon which he collapsed and the spreading fire went on to cover him.

"Brother..."

The giant creature reached his hand out to the flames and was about to embrace his brother's corpse.

His back shook once.

A shrill gunshot resounded and pierced the shoulder of the creature.

Dalian stood stock still in blank amazement, while Huey bit on his lips and turned around.

Some men, wearing long coats, had taken notice of the fire, climbed over the fence and were now pointing their guns at Chez. Huey recognized them.

"The Police...?! The guys that observed Roy! Why at such a time?!"

Huey tried to stop them by shouting, but it didn't reach them in their excitement.

"Its the beast... the Beast of Ashwell appeared!"

"Mr. Hurston is being attacked! Shoot...!"

Chez got on his knees while gunshots continuously resounded. Even so, he didn't let go of the corpse of his brother. Mustering all the strength he had left, he was about to walk away dragging his feet along. Chez was trying to escape by slipping into the dark.

If Huey and Dalian kept silent, then nobody would ever get to know that the old man, now buried under countless bricks, was shot by Roy. What's left was to carry away Roy's corpse.

If there's no corpse of Roy, then all the blame goes to the "Beast of Ashwell".

The murder of the barrister, the murder of the city council, everything---

Not for the sake of the Hurston family, but to protect Roy's honour.

Chez was planning to take all the bad reputation on his own.

"Wait, Chez!"



And Dalian called the name of this creature. The black-dressed girl presented a book to him.

The forbidden Phantom Book only the present head of the Hurston family is allowed to read.

The Pedigree of All Creation---!

"This Phantom Book has chosen you as its owner! With the knowledge written in it, it shouldn't be impossible to even return your body to that of a common human... so please... take it with you."

The black beast shook its head to her shout.

Then it smiled timidly - or so it seemed.

With an unbelievable instantaneous force, the creature climbed the wall of the mansion and went away from them. But even then, several bullets still pierced him.

"Chez..."

Dalian, left spiritless, let loose of the book, which then fell to the ground.

The blue roses became entangled in flames and burned away.

At last, the injured giant beast melted into the dark and disappeared.

Part 8

The next morning. Huey and Dalian were riding on a train to the capital.

There weren't many passengers; probably because it was still early morning. The two of them were the only ones in the their wagon.

Dalian was obviously ill tempered and was alone reading a book.

She seemed rather unenthusiastic, since her reading speed was, considering that it's her, quite slow. Even with her beloved fried bread, she ate just enough for two people.

Huey was sitting on the opposite seat and was reading the newspaper he bought at the train station. The train accelerated easefully and the morning sun shone diagonally through the window.

"It looks like Chez's corpse couldn't be found."

Huey muttered this suddenly while holding the tabloid paper.

Half of the article in the cheap local newspaper was filled with the topic of "Beast of Ashwell Appeared Again". The entire Police pursued the beast and, supported by the hunters, encircled it. Then they shot it with countless bullets, whereupon the beast fell from

the cliff. The death of the beast was taken for granted, but it seemed like they didn't find the corpse although they searched for it until morning.

The remaining half of the article was about Roy Hurston who got murdered by the beast. His achievements as city council member and his capabilities were highly praised in it. Chez was only mentioned in a little column as a victim.

"...I don't want to talk about this stupid dog."

Dalian said so without raising her face in a sulky voice.

"I was about to do him a favour by lending him the book and this stupid dog chose to carry along a corpse. Because he couldn't carry the corpse together with the book... I don't know any more about this darn fool... that's why I hate dogs."

The black-dressed girl thrust up her chin, gazing out of the window at the sky. Her sulking did, somehow, seem like she was suppressing tears.

Huey smiled lightly.

"My opinion is a bit different, I guess?"

"...what should be wrong?"

Dalian seemed offended and asked so.

"It's not like Chez didn't want the Phantom Book. He didn't want to drag you into the gunfight. He didn't want to hurt you!"

"Whatever reason there is, a fool is a fool."

Dalian became even more ill tempered. She raised her eyebrows and scowled at Huey,

"And you are 100 years early to state your opinion to me, despite just being Huey."

After these harsh words, Dalian closed her book. Then she reached out for Huey's bread and bit freely into it.

"My, my" Huey shrugged his shoulders. Then he recalled something and took something out from his coat. It was a small cut flower.

Huey stretched his hand out with agility and decorated a vase for one flower with it.

It was a flower bud that was about to start to bloom with blue petals.

"You took those roses with you?"

Dalian asked, with her cheeks stuffed with bread.

"There was just one left."

Huey folded the newspaper and shifted his gaze to the outside.

And said as if speaking to himself,

"You can be at ease. If he's still living, he will come meet us for sure! To accept the book then."

Dalian watched the blue rose expressionless and shook her head

"After all it's just an 'unattainable goal'."

Huey smiled and said lightly jokingly.

"No... it's 'attaining the impossible', right?"

The flower that was the only one of its kind was silently swaying in the morning sun.

It was afternoon in the town. A couple of children were sitting in a circle in a small, dirty classroom.

The room was located in the back yard of a noble's mansion, in an old wooden building. The building was plain in construction and had probably been inhabited by servants. The smell of chalk was in the air of the classroom, whose walls were stained black by the smoke of coal.

On the dilapidated table in the midst of them there were old newspapers and magazines.

"Have you read it?" murmured one of the children listlessly while skimming through a magazine.

The speaker was about twelve or thirteen years old and had eerily resigned eyes that did not consort with his still young countenance. The magazine in his hands was filled with all kinds of complicated formulas.

The children opposite him giggled amusedly.

"If you are talking of Stark's thesis that earned him a Nobel Prize in physics, then yes."

"The same goes for Soddy's research in radioactive decay and Haber's methods for producing chlorine gas."

"Simple, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it surely was."

The children kept on giggling. Another one of them said as he watched a newspaper on the table, "Seems like there was yet another riot at the colonies."

"That is because the committee promulgates those absurd laws!"

"There's also a problem with who was selected for the governor general and the tax system."

"I concur. Why can the adults not even understand such simple things?" someone asked in a honestly wondering tone.

Someone else answered with a laugh, "Because they're fools!"

"Indeed, they are fools, the adults."

"Yes. Fools."

"Are we really going to be fine if we entrust the world to those foolish adults...?"

The amused laughter that had filled the classroom stopped abruptly.

They looked at each other with vacant eyes.

There was a very special book on the table they surrounded. There was no author denoted, nor was there any indication of its publishing date. The only evident fact was its old age.

The magnificent leather binding had lost its color during the many years it had witnessed, and one could barely read the title.

The Book of Wisdom. That was the title of the book.

Chapter 3 - The Book of Wisdom

Episode 03: Liber Sapientiae

Part 1

Huey awoke in darkness that day.

Someone was violently shaking his resting body, producing the sound of metal clashing from time to time. It was the sound of armor.

"—Wake up, Huey. Huey!"

A slightly lisping girl was calling his name by his ear. While her voice was pleasant and clear, the tone that came with it was haughty.

"Uh..." groaned Huey, while opening his eyes.

He groped for the pocketwatch that was next to his bed, but he found himself unable to read the time from it. The only thing he could tell was that it was pitch black.

The same held true for the scenery outside, which was as dark as in the depths of the sea.

In this darkness stood a small girl with long black hair.

She wore black clothing which blended into the night. The entire garment was adorned with countless laces and frills that were partially covered by metal plates. It was an odd mixture that could neither be called dress nor armor.

And in front of her chest, an old lock, tied by silver chains, shone dimly.

"What happened, Dalian...? It looks as though it is night outside," asked Huey, still bleary-eyed.

"You may rest assured. Your eyesight is perfectly normal," the girl in black that had been called Dalian replied tonelessly.

Huey paused for a moment and then put on a frown, "...what's the time?"

"The sun will rise soon."

"Mh," Huey sat up with difficulty. He could still see nothing but thick darkness outside and could sense no indication of dawn.

The white moon hung in the eastern sky. Not even the roosters of the farmers had awoken yet.

Similarly, Huey had been deep in sleep too, of course, and was violently roused from slumber. By that queerly dressed girl.

"So... why did you wake me so late in the night?" asked Huey in a powerless voice after he had shaken his dozy head.

Dalian was standing vacantly in the darkness, with a incredibly beautiful face that would remind one of a well-crafted porcelain doll. In her arms she was holding a coat, making it evident that she was anxious to go out.

Huey contorted his face slightly upon noticing this, for the only plausible reason for hitting him awake he could think of was that there was some kind of emergency.

Dalian, however, told him with her calm voice, "We are going to the bookstore."

"...Eh?"

Huey's movements stopped for a few moments. He was gazing at her with eyes that signified his bafflement. Dalian on her part glared back at him and protested, "I'm bored because I have read myself through all books in this mansion. Thus, we are going to buy books."

"...You read yourself through all of them?"

Huey stared at Dalian in amazement.

As hard to believe as it was, she was not carrying a book around with her.

His grandfather, an eminent bibliomaniac, had collected a great number of books from all parts of the world. And as it seemed, those mansion-filling piles had been too few to her.

Unless there was a special circumstance, Dalian was practically always reading some type of book. Other than reading, she did almost nothing. Hence, it had been a mere question of time until she read herself through all of them, which, by chance, happened today, this very moment.

"How long do you plan on counting sheep there? Get on your feet already, you fishmouth," Dalian ranted while looking down to him.

"...a fishmouth, huh," sighed Huey, before he pulled himself together and raised his face again. "But you know, Dalian... bookstores aren't normally open so late in the night!"

"Even morons know that much," replied Dalian coldly, "Still, you are explaining the obvious. Are you by any chance a moron?"

Huey shrugged his shoulders tiredly.

"Then why do you wake me this late?"

"If we take the first train, we'll reach the capital before noon," she answered his question straight away.

Huey leaned forward, surprised.

"Wait a moment! Do you have in mind to go to the capital just to buy some books?"

Dalian nodded.

"Yes. We will **also go to the capital**. After buying most of the important books there, we will head to the surrounding places and buy the rest. Am I not being truly effective? Now hurry up and get yourself prepared when you're done admiring my brilliance," the black-dressed girl said, before turning from him and leaving the room. After looking after her for a few moments in blank amazement, Huey took his pocket watch once again.

"...oh please spare me."

There was still nothing but darkness beyond the window.

Part 2

That bookstore was situated in a side street of the university town which was lively with restaurants and shops.

The interior of the two-story building was buried in tall bookshelves in which countless books were put tidily. With sparkling eyes, Dalian looked around in the shop and as soon as she had found a shelf to her liking, she rushed to it like an energetic puppy.

"Hm, a fairly good range of goods." Dalian flashed a smile while looking up at the titles in the shelf.

"This is the oldest university town in our country. If you're looking for scientific books, I think you'll have better fortune here than in the capital," said Huey as he sighed. He wiped away the tears at the corner of his eyes and shook his head slightly to get rid of his sleepiness.

Dalian didn't give him an answer, but she was in a high spirited mood that was not often seen.

She scurried around in the store, took all kinds of books just to put them back, and at last, stood still before a shelf deep inside the store. Then, after searching with her gaze for someone that looked like a shop assistant, she called him roughly.

"Hey, that shopman over there. Hand us all the books from this shelf to that shelf in the corner over there!"

The shop assistant turned around, bothered and wordless.

A queerly clothed black girl had entered his shop and was saying absurd things; who could blame him for parading his discontent?

Dalian, irritated by his attitude, twisted her mouth, "Have you not heard me, you midlife loafer?! I just told you that I'm doing the compliment to you of buying all the books from here to there!"

"Hey, Dalian..."

Huey rushed to Dalian in a hurry. He covered the mouth of the ranting girl and removed her forcefully from the baffled shop assistant.

"Stop it! What are you doing, Huey!" Dalian struggled fiercely to come free by flailing around her arms and legs. With a scowl, she glared at Huey, "Let go of me! You rude fool! You reek like a geezer!"

Huey acquiesced and let go of her. Dalian was pulled down by gravity, however, and fell to the ground headfirst. Her armor produced a deafening noise.

Huey shook his head and let out a sigh.

"Dalian. Listen up. Don't you think it's strange to buy books like that?"

"...What's strange is your head. What is wrong with buying books in a bookstore?" A teary-eyed Dalian looked up at him with resenting eyes, while holding her reddened forehead.

"You know, you don't normally buy whole shelves! We haven't come here to buy heads of sardines or something, after all."

"But Wez has always bought books this way."

Dalian glared at Huey in disbelief, who then frowned slightly. "Wez" was the nickname of his grandfather who had passed away half a year ago.

Wez was a so-called bibliomaniac and famous in a certain lobby. Consequently, the mansion Huey had inherited from him was filled with thousands upon thousands of books. It was said that among those books one could even find some curious and banned books that his grandfather had bought for horrendous prices, as well as cursed books. Apparently, he had once given away half of his property for a single book.

"Don't compare me to my grandfather. In the first place, how do you plan on getting all those books home? Besides, we haven't brought enough money with us anyway."

"Ngh... then what should we do?"

Dalian bent her brows in disturbance.

Huey just shrugged his shoulders, "Just choose those you really want to read. Restrict yourself to five or six books and I'll buy them for you."

"Five or six?!" Dalian widened her eyes. She shook her head weakly as though she had experienced a huge shock. "You tell me to select five or six books from that great number? How do you call this type of torture?! Is it so fun tormenting me?! Do you make a fetish of harming others, you hopeless sado?"

"At any rate, we aren't going to buy a whole shelf. Select only the ones you need."

Ignoring the girl's tirade, he headed back deeper into the store.

The bookstore did not only handle scientific books, but also dramas and the latest novels.

While letting out a sigh, Huey took one of the new releases that had been piled. It was a detective novel by a popular author. At first, he only speed read some of the pages, but as soon as there was a most mysterious incident, he started to flip through it with a serious mien.

In the beginning, Dalian left it at just scowling at him, but then she sneaked behind him on her tip-toes and whispered into his ear, "It's the mail delivery."

"Eh?"

"The culprit masqueraded as the postman. He concealed the corpse in a luggage bag, therefore the gatekeepers didn't notice."

"Ugh..."

Huey contorted his face when he was suddenly given away the ending, whereas Dalian chuckled mischievously. While glaring at her with a sidelong-glance, Huey took another book from a shelf.

Dalian narrowed her eyes immediately, "In this one it's the narrator himself, the doctor. Just read the depiction carefully when the corpse gets discovered."

"Why are you doing this?!" Huey burst out.

Dalian countered, unimpressed, "You were mean to me first."

"I merely taught you common sense!"

Understandingly enough, his voice was rough. Dalian pursed her lips and sulkily turned her head from him.

Suddenly, someone—it was a laughing woman's voice—addressed them from behind.

"Hey, hey, don't fight at such a place. You're just causing trouble!"

When Huey turned around, he found a young woman who was carrying a book, which she had apparently been reading.

Her age was around Huey's; either in her late teens or at most, in her early twenties. She was rather short, but still a head taller than Dalian.

She could surely be called beautiful because of her pretty face, but what left even more of an impression was her smile. She laughed innocently like a child.

"If you lack the money to buy those books, shall I lend you some? I'll set a high interest rate though," teased the young woman while peeking into Huey's face.

Huey gazed at her, completely taken by surprise. "...Camilla?"

"Yaaay! It's been a while, Huey. Why didn't you get in touch with me when you've come back to England?" Camilla nodded over-happily.

While all this was happening, Dalian was hiding behind Huey.

At last, she hesitantly poked out half her head with utmost care. It was the behavior of a small animal. Moreover, she had taken a thick book and was shielding her head with it.

While pulling the hem of Huey's coat, she whispered, "Who's that blonde over there that looks as if she had no strong points at all apart from her face?"

"Well... how should I put it...," whispered Huey ambiguously.

Camilla leaned towards Dalian, "Who's this little one? Isn't she a little too tall for your daughter, Huey?"

"...daughter?!" The black-dressed girl reddened and was bereft of speech. Apparently, she took offense at being treated like a child and trembled in anger.

Camilla, however, laughed unaffectedly and said brightly, "No, just joking! Don't worry, I'm informed. You're looking after the girl your grandfather has adopted, right?"

"Adopted... huh. More or less, yeah...," Huey nodded awkwardly.

After hearing him out with a raised brow, Camilla suggested, "I'd love to chat a bit with you. Do you have time to have a cup of tea with me?"

"We should have time," he said and turned around to the girl behind him. Dalian puffed her cheeks and glared at Camilla.

Camilla put her finger on her lips, pondering over something, and looked up at the ceiling. Then she took out a little package from her bag for some reason.

The package was wrapped with a ribbon and was from a famous confectionery on this street. As soon as she untied the ribbon, the delicious smell of baked sweets filled the air.

Camilla opened the package and Dalian leaned forward.

She closed the package and Dalian quickly hid behind Huey.

Camilla opened the package and Dalian stuck out her head again.

"How about enjoying a cup of tea together? I'll even add some freshly baked sweets! Wow!" Camilla asked with a broad smile.

Dalian fell into silence, caught between the two options that enfolded before her, but eventually asked with a oddly serious voice, "...will I get some clotted cream to the scones?"

"Yes, of course. I'll even get you some jam for your black tea!" Camilla nodded and laughed merrily.

After putting back the book to its original place, Dalian walked towards her. Then she turned back to Huey and urged him with reproaching eyes, "What are you waiting for? We're going!"

Part 3

Huey and Dalian were taken to Camilla's holiday house within the town.

It was a pleasant building that had a little, yet beautiful garden. There was a large river nearby, which they could admire from the glass veranda where the tea room was.

"Huey and I are childhood friends!" explained Camilla, while delighting in watching Dalian, who was still a little wary of her. "My father works as a trader, you know, so our families have known each other for quite long. Especially Old Wez because he was a patron of us and visited our mansion quite often. That's also how I met Huey."

"....."

Dalian wordlessly turned her gaze towards Huey in order to have him confirm Camilla's statement. He seemed to be a little bothered and sighed.

"That was ages ago! She went to the new continent for a while."

"New continent?" Dalian slightly raised an eyebrow.

"Yay!" Camilla showed her the thumbs up and nodded over-cheerfully.

Dalian was taken aback and put on a frown. Apparently, she was overwhelmed by Camilla's America-style frankness.

"I was there conducting some of my father's business. I've returned right after the war was over."

"So that's why you're dressed like this?" asked Dalian, apparently having a queer aha moment, while wandering with surveying eyes upon Camilla's clothes from top to bottom.

"Ugh... so it looks strange, after all? But over there it's quite normal..." she explained herself, whispering, while holding up the hems of her skirt with her fingers.

Though not as much as Dalian, her appearance was also quite uncommon.



She wore a white blouse with a necktie, and a fedora on her head. Her slightly peculiar yet pretty fair hair was cut at shoulder length and on her feet were tall lace-up boots. The unadorned skirt she wore was fastened with a leather belt so massive one could tuck a gun into it. She looked much more like one of the pioneers of the new continent rather than a daughter of a wealthy man in the capital.

"Come to think of it, why were you in that bookstore anyway, Camilla?" asked Huey suddenly.

Her parents were wealthy and managed several enterprises, hence, it would have been normal for someone in her position to just send a servant or call a bookseller home.

Camilla, however, shook her head casually.

"I wouldn't necessarily bother going myself for normal books, yeah. But you know, since it's about the textbooks I'm going to give to the kids, I wanted to check and select them with care."

Dalian cocked her head.

"Textbooks?"

"I'm voluntarily running a small private school. You see, there are kids that live in poor families and can't afford a governess but still wish for higher education. Well, as soon as they manage to

enter some university, they may be awarded a grant, but until then , there's no way around studying on their own. And that's what I'm helping them with," explained Camilla proudly.

Dalian surveyed her with marveled eyes and formulated her thoughts, "...you are one queer woman."

Huey gave a laugh and nodded. "She is. Has always been."

"How rude!" Camilla put her hands on her hips. "To begin with, you're no different, Huey. Have you found *it* by now?"

"It...?"

"—the Bibliotheca Mystica de Dantalian." Camilla flashed a grin . "The private library that goes by the name of the demon that reigns over knowledge and is depicted with books in his hands. The prohibited repository that holds 900,000 and 666 phantom books, of which none ought to exist. You've been searching for that all the time, haven't you?"

"Who knows?" Huey feigned ignorance. While giving Dalian, who was glaring at him with a sidelong glance, a shrug, he added, "Did I ever talk to you about such a thing?"

Camilla got a little huffy and approached his face.

"You can't tell me that you forgot! I've been looking forward to seeing it, you know, since I thought Old Wez could actually possess it."

Huey refrained from answering and instead took a sip of the black tea that had been brought by a maid.

Camilla let out a big, stressed sigh, upon which she immediately contained herself and raised her face. "Right! Now that we're talking about books, I've been meaning to ask you something. Say, are there books that make you brighter?"

"...books that make you brighter?"

"Yeah. Books that raise your intelligence just by reading them."

"Well, I do think there's always something you can gain from reading a book. Be it knowledge, imagination or something else," Huey answered frankly.

However, Camilla shook her head with a surprisingly serious mien. "That's not what I mean! Just by simply reading it, you get as bright as though you were someone completely different. For instance, you suddenly know things you aren't supposed to know or you become able to easily solve the most complex calculations."

"A book that raises your mental faculties...?"

"Mh, yeah. I think that's what it is." Camilla paused to think, but nodded before long. "To tell the truth, I'm talking about Mildred."

"Mildred...? Do you mean the Mildred from the Dewar family?"

Huey struggled to recall the face of a woman he had completely forgotten about, letting his gaze wander in the room.

With a wry smile while watching him do so, she replied, "Yes, that disagreeable witch. Remember? She's running a private school , too, you know. Anyway, a while back, she came accosting me, burning with rivalry, and that's when she told me that she obtained a phantom book that raises the intelligence of her students."

"...a phantom book?" Huey's mien darkened. "Did she say it was a phantom book?"

"Yes. Full of pride, I tell you," said Camilla while twisting her lips. Then however, she seemed a little worried. "But you know, after that, she changed. She suddenly stopped leaving her house... and fearfully said she couldn't handle her students anymore because they got too intelligent..."

"Too intelligent...?" Huey turned around to Dalian, still with a stern expression. "How do you think about it, Dalian?"

"Books that teach learning styles are not rare at all," Dalian ill-humoredly scowled at Camilla. "It's recorded that mnemonic techniques had already been used 2500 years ago in ancient Greece , and many ancient cultures had developed their own ways of rapid calculations to calculate complex problems mentally."

"Simonides' [memory palace](#) and Vedic Mathematics, right?" Camilla noted.

Dalian widened her eyes, "Yes. It seems you have done your homework... though you don't look like it."

"Ugh... I don't look like it? What do you mean...?" Camilla sobbed while sloughing her shoulders. "But anyway, it's not related to those things. I've only heard of it myself, too, but apparently not only their knowledge, but also their way of thinking and personality changed completely in just a few days' time..."

"In a few days?" Huey raised an eyebrow.

It was a physical impossibility that by reading a book, the intelligence of a student would rise so abruptly as to frighten the teacher—if it was just a normal book.

If something of that kind had really happened, then they were made to read an abnormal book.

"I see...," Dalian put a frown on her clean face and sighed. "I may have come upon something. It's presumably a real phantom book. The so-called Liber Sapientiae which was written by a nameless latin. To think that such a thing was still out there somewhere..."

After saying this, she kept quiet with a contorted face. Apparently, that phantom book was connected with unpleasant memories.

"A phantom book that lifts one's intelligence without limit, huh. It should be a good idea to collect it as soon as possible."

Huey stood up with a sight. However, Dalian moved no muscle

.

"No... just let it be," she said, while adding some sugar to her tea

Huey countered with a slightly strained voice, "But it's a phantom book! What if it crosses the boundary because someone who doesn't have the qualifications is reading it?"

"The 'Book of Wisdom'... awards its reader perfect knowledge. The reader is able to reign over the people or to destroy the world if he wants to."

Huey was clearly disturbed by Dalian's dreadful statements.

"Then we should get it all the more..."

"Just let it be," ordered Dalian coldly. "The initial issue of the 'Book of Wisdom' is already in the Bibliotheca. I don't need two editions of the same book. If you get on all fours before me, I may even deign to show it to you?"

"I wouldn't go that far for it!" Huey shook his head, irritated.

So far, Camilla had only watched their exchange with confusion, but now she joined their conversation. "Hey, you two. What are you talking about? Phantom books? Bibliotheca? ...it sounds almost as if the Bibliotheca Mystica de Dantalian really..."

When Camilla asked this evident question, Dalian cowed her with a severe gaze. Then she gave her thumbs up and said, "Yay".

"Yay?"

Camilla twisted her lips bewilderedly upon accidentally responding to Dalian by giving her thumbs up as well.

Part 4

Mildred Dewar's mansion was just on the opposite side of the river.

She didn't want to meet anyone at first because she was in a foul mood, but as soon as they told her that Camilla had sent them, she let them in, though only grumpily.

The woman that welcomed them in the parlor, Mildred, was a little older than Huey. She clad herself in tidy clothes and had pulled her brunette hair into a chignon. She could be called an example of a sober person who cultivates good manners, so it was no surprise that she didn't get along with Camilla. Her clean-living countenance, however, looked somewhat exhausted.

"Lord Hugh Anthony Disward?" Mildred let out a ill-humored sigh upon listening to Huey's self-introduction. "I remember you. You're a friend of Camilla Sauer Keynes'. What do you want? Did you come to laugh at me?"

Huey smiled wryly at her blatantly offensive attitude.

"That's not it! I would merely like to hear something from you about the phantom book you've obtained."

"...I don't want to tell you," Mildred refused point-blank. "Why don't you just ask the students directly? They'll tell you *anything*! They are monsters, after all!"

"Monsters?" Huey wrinkled his brow. "It's cruel to call your own students like this."

"Oh, you know nothing, do you?" Mildred laughed out. It was a very bitter laugh, as if a hole opened in a beautiful sculpture. "Those children have surpassed us humans. They have monstrous computational ability, a perfect power of understanding and have knowledge in all kinds of fields... in their eyes we're just lower creatures in line with monkeys!"

Huey's expression disappeared more and more from his face. Not because he was frightened, but because he was fed up from the bottom of his heart with the nuisance he had earned himself.

"Children whose knowledge has risen dramatically in just a few days, huh... if they have really become monsters greater than humans, what will they use their power for...?"

"I don't know," Mildred shook her head impassively. Although the sun was still high in the sky, she reeked slightly of alcohol. "We couldn't stop them anyway. If they felt like it, it would literally be a child's play for them to subjugate mankind or even bring about our ruin!"

"...did the phantom book turn them into what they are now?"

"It did! It's all the fault of that book and the strange figures in there!"

"Where are the children at the moment?"

Mildred answered his question silently by pointing at the backyard of the mansion.

A plain, old, wooden building stood there. Apparently, it had originally been used by the gardener and his family, but has since then been altered in order to be used as a private schoolroom.

One could see several children inside the room.

Even though their teacher, Mildred, was absent, they showed no sign of playing around. Instead, they were seated in a circle and leading a heated discussion. Such a picture was no rarity in a university, but seeing young children discuss something expressionlessly was accompanied by an eerie out-of-place feeling.

"I wish I'd never obtained that book. How foolish I was for trying to triumph over Camilla... the children were so cute before then, though perhaps not so clever..." whispered Mildred while sinking into her chair.

She was apparently quite worn-out physically. Huey judged it was not possible to get more out of her.

He thanked her and stood up.

Right before they left the parlor, Dalian turned around to the gloomy Mildred and said calmly, "Humans are not necessarily more diligent or happier than monkeys."

Mildred raised her face, surprised, and gazed blankly after Dalian as they left.

The interior of the small private school was in general rather dirty and dust-covered.

What unfolded before them when they opened the creaking door was a small schoolroom, consisting of a blackboard with chalk stains on it and a teacher's desk. Moreover, six children had put together their run-down desks and were sitting around them.

Judging by their looks, they had probably only just absolved elementary school. One could almost see no stirring of emotion in their countenances, and their eyes had a touch of apathy.

Upon noticing Huey and Dalian, they turned around wordlessly.

The children didn't look disinterested, but actually seemed to enjoy observing the behavior of their visitors. As if dealing with a stray cat they had found, they waited for a reaction.

"Are you Mildred's students?" asked Huey.

Multiple children opened their mouth simultaneously:

"We are, so?"

"Are you the Black Biblioprincess and her keykeeper?"

"The caretaker of the Bibliotheca Mystica de Dantalian, huh... Most interesting. It actually exists?"

"Did you come for the 'Book of Wisdom'?"

Their utterances disturbed Huey slightly.

"...Do you know about us?"

Only a very small number of people, familiar with occult knowledge like magic, were supposed to know about the Biblioprincess, proprietor of the phantom library called "Bibliotheca Mystica de Dantalian", and her servant.

Mere common children couldn't possibly know those terms, no matter how high their intelligence was. But they responded easily, while Huey was more and more surprised.

"There is a hypothesis called 'Six degrees of separation'."

"It's an idea that implies that you are acquainted with almost anyone on Earth within six steps that go like 'the friend of a friend of a friend'."

"In short, you can basically obtain any information you want. Even young children like us can."

"Our teacher sadly didn't understand it, though, no matter how many times we explained it to her..."

Their artless laughter resounded within the silent classroom.

Huey caught a glimpse of Mildred's mansion and then let out a weak sigh.

"May we have your phantom book?"

He was sure they'd refuse, but the children nodded readily without further ado.

"Sure. We don't need it anymore."

With a rather surprised expression, Huey reached for the old book on the desk.

There was nothing in the book that looked like letters. Only maze-like queer patterns and figures filled the pages, resembling the walls of ancient ruins.

"This book releases the potential capability of a child's brain."

"I'm sure you have heard of those rare people among the mentally retarded and autistics that are gifted with a superhuman computational ability or superhuman memory, right?"

"The potential capability of a human brain is about that high!"

"The patterns that are drawn in this phantom book are designed to build a neural network to tap those capabilities postnatally."

Unfortunately though, it only works for children because their brains are still amenable to influence."

"...I see."

Huey wrinkled his brow and closed the book. He braced himself against the wall with his hand, apparently feeling a little dizzy, and shook his head.

"Mnemonic devices and calculation techniques were originally meant for ancient statesmen like priests," Dalian explained to Huey in a disinterested voice. "In order to parade their superiority to the uneducated population, they were in need of a way to calculate the orbit of celestial bodies or to remember their complicated canons by heart."

The children nodded eagerly to the explanation of the black-dressed girl.

"Their knowledge, such as their calculation techniques and mnemonic devices, was then strictly locked away in order to preserve their special privileges."

"Only a very small part has been passed on to our age in form of mathematics and fortune-telling."

"The real technologies of the ancient priests have been lost along with their ruin."

"Well, and one of those you find in this book. A technique they had used to train new priests and priestesses."

Huey had mixed feeling about being one-sidedly instructed by children. He let out a weary sigh.

"...What do you plan on doing with that technology?"

His right hand was in his coat, feeling a black, metal object—a top-break revolver that was loaded with six bullets.

The children blinked in wonderment.

"Hm? We don't have any plans really."

"Eh?" Huey breathed dubiously.

However, there was no sign of a previously arranged lie. No, they even laughed with pleasure.

"Did you think we would want to seize control of the world in place of the foolish grownups?"

"Oh well, it wouldn't be impossible if we went for that."

"First comes the economy. It's possible to earn a healthy profit in a short time by trading in the futures market with money taken from investment funds."

"An interesting option would be interfering in politics with the earned funds. Specifically we could also stir up the army of a politically instable country and have them start war. That would make the prices soar and enable us to make a good deal of money out of the exchange rate."

"On top of that, it would be easy to exploit the anxiety of the population then. We mustn't forget religion. We could, for instance , try interweaving economic and scientific terminology into the doctrines."

"Well, but we won't do that."

"Yeah, we won't."

Huey inclined his head, now completely baffled.

"...Why not?"

The children sighed to his question.

"Look, what good comes for us from ruling the world?"

"That would only get us some stressful time. After all, we might be assassinated some day by a subordinate after finally ascending the throne with difficulty."

"Why do capable people like us have to look after the foolish masses that only stand in our way?"

Huey, at a loss, looked back and forth between their faces and the phantom book in his hands.

"In that case, what are you going to do henceforth?"

With chins on their palms, they replied listlessly:

"Didn't you hear us? Nothing!"

"We'll just idle our time away without even working."

"While our parents are still alive, they'll care for us, and it should be feasible to make ends meet by taking advantage of ostentatious people like the teacher of this school."

"Don't worry. We don't have in mind resorting to irrational means like stealing."

A bunch of children with vacant eyes were there, laughing amusedly.

While gazing at them with a helpless expression, Huey said, "But with that knowledge of yours, couldn't you become researchers and develop new theories and such, you know...?"

"It doesn't pay if you take our chances of success into consideration."

They looked up at Huey with derogatory eyes.

"Even if we entered a renowned university, as long as you don't have money and connections, you won't go very far. Even if you found a good job, you would end up being sponged on by your superior."

"In the first place, what should we do if we succeeded and became rich? Live a happy-go-lucky life without working?"

"We'd better do that without working to begin with, then."

While listening to them, Huey held his head as though he suffered from a fierce head-ache.

With a tired expression, he leaned on the wall, "Yeah... I'm sorry . I also don't know what's right anymore..."

In order to give him a leg up, one child said, "Well, I suggest you take that book and go home."

Huey nodded powerlessly.

"I'll do that!"

By the time they left Mildred's mansion, it was already near evening. The evening sun was approaching the horizon, shining in the colors of apricot jam, while the reflection on the water threw a reddish light on their faces.

"Dalian, did you know that possessors of the 'Book of Wisdom' become like that...?" asked Huey while trudging forth.

"That's why I told you to let it be," grumbled Dalian before she continued with a pitying sigh, "Those who are really intelligent realize before challenging something that the odds are against them. If you don't want to lose, just don't try to do anything in the first place."

"I see", murmured Huey, "Come to think of it, I get the impression that most of the memorable individuals in history weren't geniuses, but just stubborn and persistent."

Dalian let out a mischievous giggle and looked at him.

"Rejoice. It seems you aren't completely hopeless."

"...why oh why doesn't that please me?" Huey said with a frown

After they had walked for a while along the river, a cab came in sight. Dalian quickened her pace a little and turned around to Huey.

"Now that you're done, we have to go back to the mansion of that spinster."

"Spinster...? Do you mean Camilla?" he asked and added with a wry smile, "Now that's rude."

Dalian nodded strongly, "Yes. She hasn't served me the promised scone yet."

"Eh, just for that...?"

She glared at him when he showed his surprise, and continued with an oddly serious tone, "'Just for that'?! You shalt not make light of clotted cream! And as soon as I'm done eating, we will visit some more bookstores!"

"Oh... so you remembered..."

Huey breathed a sigh towards the sunset.

Suddenly, Dalian changed the subject. "By the way, what are you going to do with this phantom book? I don't need it. No good comes from meddling with it."

"A phantom book that raises the intelligence of its readers, huh..," Huey whispered expressionlessly, holding the old, faded book before him, "Well! It is said that one must be a little foolish, if one does not want to be even more stupid!"

He took a crude army lighter out of his coat pocket and set the leather binding aflame.

The book burned down, the ashes dancing in the wind.

Special Chapter 1 - The Book of Dictators

Talisman of Despot

He was a serious student.

Although still young, he was grieving over the future of his country more earnestly than everyone else.

But the more earnestly he thought, the more hopeless and dark the future of his country appeared to him.

The resources were sparse in his country and daily life was hard to overcome.

The cities were crowded with adults who fail to get jobs and the crime rate was constantly growing.

Bordering countries were threatening his country with their military strength because of the land.

In the end, he lost all hope and began to live a vapid, ephemeral life.

Then one day, he came across a little girl.

She had a beautiful appearance.

Faint green hair resembling an emerald.

White skin resembling marbles, almost translucent.

Countless frills and laces were stuffed into her deep crimson colored dress, similar to the color of blood. Out of the gaps between them, gauntlets as well as a breast plate could be seen.

The right eye of the girl was colored in the same emerald-green as her hair, while her left eye was covered by a metal eye patch shimmering with a dark gray lustre.

There was a big keyhole in the midst of her eye patch that resembled an old lock---

"It might be too late for this country, huh?" the man said with a tired voice to her.

The girl asked back, why he would think that.

"You see, the politicians are incompetent and the bureaucracy is on the ladder way, corroded by corruption and bribery. The people are not thinking of anything other than to stand in the way of each other. I'm telling you, there's no hope for this country, as long those guys are running it!"

He sorrowfully answered with those words.

"How idiotic!" the girl said.

"If you say the current rulers are incompetent, then just try running the country yourself."

The man was taken aback and asked her:

"Are you telling me to become a politician?"

"Right! You're thinking more earnestly about the future of this country than anyone else, aren't you? Then you're supposed to rule it."

After a short consideration, he shook his head weakly.

"That won't work. Even if I'd try to improve politics on my own, another politician would get in my way. I'm sure."

"How idiotic!" the girl laughed.

"Then just become the most powerful politician throughout the country! After that, just capture and kill anyone hostile to you."

The man was taken aback and asked:

"Are you telling me to become a dictator?"

"Right! All other politicians are incompetent and corrupted, aren't they? Then you're supposed to rule this country on your own."

After a short consideration, he shook his head weakly.

"That won't work. Even if I'd try to rule this country on my own, another politician would assassinate me. I'm sure."

The girl, however, showed a brilliant smile.

"Oh no, it will work. It will. You were chosen by this phantom book after all."

She presented to him a book.

It was an old book written in the language of a country that was destroyed ages ago.

The man accepted the book and looked at it with a wondering face.

The girl explained to him:

"It's a book made for dictators. As long you're conforming to what's written in it, nobody will be able to injure you."

"I see. That sure is splendid."

He believed in what she had said.

And then those two went their own ways.

A few years later, a young politician appeared in this country.

He was a politician that was thinking more earnestly about the future of his country than anyone else.

In order to gain resources, he invaded other countries and gave wealth to the people.

He made the jobless adults join the army and punished all criminals without exception with the death penalty.

Before other countries could threaten his country, he started a war against them.

His policies were supported by the citizens with wild enthusiasm. The citizens who didn't were captured without mercy and then sent to prison.

He was praised by his comrades in the government. The politicians who didn't praise him were also captured without mercy and then sent into exile to a foreign country.

And so, he had become an imposing dictator.

But for some reason, he was holding a book in his hands all the time.

There were many enemies of the dictator.

Politicians who were bereft of social status because of him. The relatives of the nobles who were executed by him. The people who lost their families or friends during the wars he started. And not to forget the citizens of the other countries, who despised his country

The ones hostile to him became rebels and tried to take his life in various ways.

They tried to mix poison into his food or planned a bomb attack on him. Sometimes they acted as allies for a while just to try and assassinate him using a blade, bow or gun. There even were some people that tried to form a rebel army or ones that instructed a famous spell caster to curse him.

However, every attempt proved to be a failure.

No matter how skilled the assassin, the dictator wasn't even wounded.

His enemies were captured one after the other and then either sent into exile to a foreign country or publicly executed on a plaza. The number of rebels opposing him was constantly declining.

Again, some years passed, until the dictator finally was able to capture the last rebel.

He decided for a public execution of the rebel as warning to the citizens.

And so, he announced to all the people gathered at the wide plaza that this would be the last rebel and no one would ever oppose him anymore.

"And that's why, I'm no longer a dictator, but the true king of this country." he continued.

Moments later, a guard stationed at the plaza suddenly shot him with a gun.

The guard wasn't a citizen of his land, but an assassin from a foreign country that mixed in with the crowd.

As one could think, the targeted man was holding an old book.

But the book didn't protect him, **who stopped being a dictator**, anymore.

The man who once was a dictator was shot by an assassin and died

The people that heard this message told each other:

"This incompetent politician finally bit the dust. Now this country is alright."

A little girl wearing a dress colored in deep crimson laughed, amused upon hearing this.

How idiotic!, the girl laughed.

At last, she got going and disappeared into the crowd of people who all smiled, full of hope.

The awful silence was broken by someone asking, "Where am I?"

A maze was unfolding before his eyes.

This maze was made up of countless bookshelves, crammed full of books.

Endlessly overlapping hexagonal corridors with no end were going through it.

In place of walls, one could see nothing but thousands upon thousands of the backs of books.

There were no windows or doors in this maze.

Even when leaning one's body over edge of the stone spiral staircase, one could merely see endless corridors of bookshelves.

The corridors were drawing a light spiral and overlapped each other in several layers from the bottom to the top, holding a giant amount of books. It seemed almost like the Tower of Babel that had been lost during the age of the Bible.

This was the tomb of dark and bizarre knowledge.

And it epitomised the universe itself.

"---There's no name to this library. No one would call the world by a name, after all, right?"

At last, another voice replied. It was the voice of a girl who sounded still young.

"Is... that so?" the owner of the first voice said. It was a boy who seemed bewildered. He asked back, "Isn't that impractical at times?"

The girl turned around upon his call. Surrounded by countless piles of books, she was reading a book laid open in her lap. Her pure white dress that consisted of silk and numerous laces waved like a petal dancing in the wind. She let out a long breath that sounded like a stifled laugh.

"Just call it as you want at such times!"

"For example...?"

"The first person that ever lost his way here called this world ' Labyrinth Library'."

"I see."

The boy nodded. Indeed, this place was like a labyrinth and at the same time, like a library.

But he was convinced there was a more appropriate name. Therefore, he asked again.

"What else?"

The girl erased her smile and told him silently,

"Bibliotheca Mystica de Dantalian"

"...Dantalian?"

"It's the name of the owner of this library," she said, and turned her eyes to the ground. Terrible loneliness was painted on her face.

Sitting in the depths of the maze of bookshelves, she returned her gaze to the book in her lap.

"Dantalian' --- Is this your true name?" the boy asked with his glance turned to her.

The girl didn't answer his question. One could only hear the sound of paper. The frail sound of turning pages.

Chapter 4 - The Pop-up Book

Episode 00: The Harlequinade

Part 1

This stone-built residence was half a day away from the capital, going by car and train.

However, the aristocratic owner of this cottage was just a come-down regional lord. So it wasn't all that palatial. It was just a very old building, really.

One could see the courtyard behind the thrown-open gate.

A wide range of flowers were blooming in all kinds of colours, and the morning fog had wet the grass that was growing thickly there.

The yard had probably not been cared for in years. It looked much more like a wilderness than a garden.

It was quite hard to believe that this place was occupied until just half a month ago, looking at this pitiful scenery.

A man was walking on the stone pavement of this garden.



It was a young man wearing a frock coat. In his left hand, he held a small travel bag.

The face under the hat looked still young; he was probably about 18 or 19 years old.

His walk gave off the impression of a trained soldier, yet one could not sense any rudeness in the atmosphere enveloping him. His mien resembled the one of an earnest boy.

The young man arrived at the door at the end of the stone paving and stopped.

After gazing at the dilapidated mansion for a while, he laughed wryly at last.

"Did I inherit something troublesome there, I wonder...? Jeez, grandpa..."

He searched his pockets and took out an old key.

The key was golden with a rather strong tinge of red. A red jewel was worked into its shaft and the key was connected to a thin chain.

"I had always thought that he didn't care about others, but I didn't expect him to live at such a place," he murmured, mixed with a wry smile, and brought the golden key towards the lock of the entrance.

However, he instantly gave up on that and lowered his arm.

The key obviously did not match the shape of the keyhole.

"It's not the key to this door, huh... well, no big surprise I guess," he sighed lightly and hung the golden key around his neck like a pendant.

Then he searched his pocket again and took out an old bunch of keys.

They looked ordinary and weren't decorated in particular.

After trying out several of those keys, the door finally opened.

He slowly pushed the oak door open and entered the mansion.

After looking around in the dark with narrowed eyes, disappointment flashed on his face.

There was nothing inside.

The minimal things needed for living such as a leather sofa or a dining table were there, but other than that, there was nothing.

The book shelves were especially strange.

They were embedded in the walls of this mansion.

But not a single book was stored in them.

The young man touched the board of a shelf and stained his finger with the thick dust that had accumulated there.

This was proof that this shelf had not been used in years.

"What does that mean...?" he frowned suspiciously, and proceeded further to the inside.

The weak light shining in from the windows illuminated the dancing dust white. It looked almost like a deserted building.

The walls of each and every room next to the corridor were covered by giant book shelves.

But all of them were empty, without exception.

Not one book remained in this mansion.

Although there were no traces of them being carried out, they all had disappeared mysteriously.

Still confused by this fact, the young man finally arrived at the last room.

The room was inside a tower on the courtyard side.

The inside was small like a storeroom. The cold stone walls weren't coated with anything and an empty bookshelf was at the corner of the room.

The young man briefly looked around in the room. He was about to return to the corridor when he suddenly noticed something.

Below the thin cotton dust on the carpet, one could see something that looked like a rail.

"...I see."

A wry smile flashed on his face, upon which he lightly pushed the book shelf next to the wall.

The deep sound of gears resounded and the big book shelf slowly turned around.

A cavity appeared behind. It was a narrow staircase leading deep underground.

Taking a lamp that had been left in the mansion, the young man started to descend the dark stairs.

When he opened the door at the end of the hidden tunnel, he arrived at a broad basement.

The walls of the dark, damp room were dimly lit by faint lights. Furthermore, constructs that looked like half-destroyed pillars were scattered throughout the whole room and were casting long shadows.

At this sight, the young man flashed an amazed smile.

Those pillars consisted of books.

All those countless books of the mansion had been gathered and piled up in this basement, filling up half of its space. It was like looking at [oriental grave stones](#), built by piling up stones.

It didn't seem like they were carried here for a purpose. It looked like someone had been reading books and had just thrown the ones he was done with somewhere, which finally led to this sight.

There were all kinds of books. Everything from cheap yellowbacks to complicated books about philosophy.

There were also many books written in old or foreign languages . It looked like someone had been reading through any paper with letters on it in reach.

Almost buried in those thousands of books, a small silhouette had bent its back without making any sound.

It was a young girl.

A little girl was sitting all alone on an armchair and had a book laid open on her knees.

In the basement of a deserted mansion, she was reading a book.

Upon seeing this unexpected spectacle, the young man held his breath, surprised.

The girl was so beautiful one could hardly believe she belonged to the living.

Her elegant black hair reached to her waist and was bound together by a lace headdress.

The colour of her eyes was as black as the night.

Her skin had a characteristic, oriental colour and seemed smooth like honey that was melted into milk; she looked almost like a valuable porcelain.

Her dress was jet black.

The dress reminded one of the ceremonial robes of medieval knights; an odd mixture that couldn't be called dress or armor.

Her skirt was layered smoothly with many frills and her waist was decorated with a ribbon and seemed as frail as a fragile article. The metallic protectors on the back of her hands and the unrefined tasset that enfolded these outlines of her were rather strange, as they didn't fit to the dress that was decorated with laces.

She didn't make a movement; her gaze was focused on the book. There was no change in her artificial-seeming expression either.

"A doll...?" the young man murmured spontaneously. But then, one could hear the sound of a turning page.

In the next moment, she had already raised her head and was directly gazing at him.

His own surprised face was reflected in her insensate eyes that seemed like a clear morion.

But still unsure whether she really was human, the young man stood there dumbfounded until she said,

"Hey... who are you?" Moving her jewel-like lips, she continued, "What business does a human have here?"

Her voice sounded as lovely as the chirping of a songbird.

"What did you... come here for?" the girl asked the young man once again.

Her choice of words was confident and brash, but her voice wavered slightly at the end of the sentence. Her expressionless black eyes seemed kind of fearful.

At first, the young man appeared slightly surprised, but then he took off his hat and bowed.

Her demonstration that she was a human made of flesh and blood and not a doll had apparently reminded him that such a gesture was a matter of course in front of a lady. Although she was a younger girl---

--- or possibly a diabolical figure.

"Please excuse my rudeness. My name is Huey. Hugh Anthony Disward. The grandson of the former owner of this mansion, actually."

He may have introduced himself politely, but that didn't change a thing about the girl's distrustful stare.

With the thick book in her arms, she stood up and carefully stepped backwards.

She was wary of Huey.

Or rather, she was afraid of him. Like a timid, shy child.

"You are... Wes' grandchild?"

She asked sceptically, upon which the young man, Huey, raised an eyebrow.

"Are you acquainted with grandpa? How have you been related?" asked the slightly confused young man, while being glared at by the black-haired girl.

When Huey came a step closer, she became startled and hid half her face behind her book as if it were a shield.

"You may not come even a single step closer." She tried to scare him off. "I was the first to ask."

"Huh?"

"Tell me... why does Wes' grandson come here after such a long time?"

The young man stood surprised for a moment, but then he got a grip and slightly shook his head. "I am looking for the library."

"Library?" The girl cocked her head slightly.

Huey nodded. "Ah, it seems to be some kind of odd private library of which no one knows exactly where it is. I thought I might hit upon a clue here by searching through grandpa's collection."

"What's the name of that... library?"

"Ahh... what was it again... oh, right, Bibliotheca... Bibliotheca Mystica de Dantalian, I think...," said Huey, pondering while searching his blurred memories with squinted eyes.

The girl's face tensed. Her eyes, resembling the ones of a fearful cat, quivered in surprise.

"How... how did you get to know that name?" For some reason, she seemed to be irritated.

Huey noted her excessive reaction with surprise. The girl stared back wordlessly.

The young man gave in with a sigh. "...it was written in his will," he said without beating about the bush any longer.

"His will?" She made a bewildered face.

Huey took a crumpled envelope out of his coat and showed the girl the names of the sender and the receiver. "Grandpa sent me this letter shortly before his death. It says that he leaves all rights for this mansion to me. Under one condition."

"Condition...?"

"Actually, that is a mystery to me as well. 'Take over the « Bibliotheca Mystica».' That's all it said." Huey shrugged.

The girl eyed Huey without a word. She seemed to ponder something. Finally, she lowered her stare and murmured by herself, "...there is no such thing here. Nor anywhere in this world."
"

"So there's no book here where I could find a clue, either?" Huey grimaced out of unease. He looked around, at the mountains of books that filled this basement, and then he asked with a slightly astounded face, "...How can you be so sure about that? Or do you even want to tell me that you've read all these books?"

The girl nodded without hesitation. Then, she briefly and succinctly declared with an emotionless voice, "I was bored."

Now Huey was completely bereft of speech.

The giant anthology of his bibliomaniac grandfather, who had collected these over half the time of his life, was placed in this room.

Among the books were quite a few written in old, no longer used languages or ones written in strange signs. Even ancient documents, which would have to be deciphered by linguists, were among them.

But the girl in front of his eyes claimed to have read them all.

He couldn't believe it. But the girl didn't convey the impression of talking nonsense, either.

"Who... are you?" asked Huey, puzzled. "Why are you all alone in here? How are you related to grandpa?"

The girl's answer was simple, "Wez and I were friends."

"Friends?"

"Yes. He... was, a good man. It is really unfortunate that he passed away." She spoke with an absent look. A slight undertone of loneliness was in her voice.

"Really?" Huey didn't seem to be able to share her feelings. "Well... in his own way, even he was a lonely old man. I'm sure he was happy that a little girl from close by like you kept him company," he said. "But I don't think it's good to just break into other people's cellars," he added with a slightly contorted face.

The girl however, kept quiet.

"Whatever. Tell me, might you have seen a cat or a dog around this mansion?" Huey composed himself and stated a question.

"No. I have seen no such thing around here," she shook her head indifferently.

Huey, puzzled, touched his cheek and said, "It might also be some kind of reptile... its name is 'Dalian'."

"Dalian?" The girl frowned.

Huey nodded with a sigh. "I actually didn't care about grandpa's will. I only came because I incidentally had some business in this town. But the annex of this letter had me a bit bothered..."

Out of the envelope he took out a crumpled sheet of paper, which was stuck between the will.

On the paper was a short text in messy handwriting.

"'Take care of Dalian', it says... since it's from that man, I guess he wanted to tell me to take care of his pet." Huey showed her the text with a serious expression.

"P...Pet?!"

"That's why I thought I should hurry and find that poor thing. After all, it would be a problem if it raged around the house, or if it were hungry, not to think of the excrement---"

"You... idiot of a grandson!"

Before Huey could finish talking, the girl let out a deep, angry voice from her lips.

A moment later, the young man contorted his face in pain. The black-clothed girl, who had fearfully stood by the wall beforehand, had suddenly run up to him and kicked his shin with the heel of her boot.

"Ouch. Why suddenly...?" Huey immediately protested, but was interrupted.

"Dalian is *my* name."

"...eh?!"

Huey could not hide his surprise in front of her beautiful, but angry face.

Then confusion appeared in his face. He had finally noticed what a peculiar trinket the girl wore.

Placed in the chest area of the noble dress, which was made of countless frills and laces, *It* was shining dully at the place where a ribbon or an adornment of flowers was supposed to be.

A steel box, affixed to a black leather band by silver chains.

A big, old lock hung in front of the girl's chest.

Part 2

That coarse lock didn't fit the girl's slender body at all, and rather reminded one of joughs used to shackle criminals and prisoners.

Huey looked at it with mixed feelings.

Judging from his face, he feared that his grandfather had locked her into that basement.

"Let me get this straight," Huey asked her with a serious mien. "You have not been confined to this basement, have you? Grandpa did not kidnap you here and... well, do something indecent with you... right?"

"The only indecent thing around here is your imagination," whispered the girl that had introduced herself as Dalian. Meanwhile, she had sat at the table in the corner of the kitchen and was nibbling on some fried bread like a small animal.

"I have merely *waited* in that room."

"Waited? For whom?"

"That is of no relation to someone as insolent as you."

Dalian looked up at Huey, who cocked his head, and sighed, disenchanted.

Then she lowered her gaze to her partially eaten fried bread and asked, "You should rather tell me where I can find the sugar."

"Sugar? Don't tell me you want to add sugar to that bun?"

"It is a firm tradition to sprinkle sugar onto fried bread," claimed Dalian point-blank. Huey seemed slightly flabbergasted, but refrained from arguing with her and instead, gave her the sugar pot from the cupboard. After sprinkling plenty more sugar on the already ginger bread, she nodded contentedly while Huey looked at her with an amazed face.

At first, Dalian was totally against going upstairs when Huey suggested so. One could almost believe that something terrible would happen if she were to go to the surface. She was that persistent.

She only followed him to the kitchen because she caught the scent of the bun in Huey's pocket. Apparently, she had actually been pretty hungry. It was only the remains of Huey's breakfast which he had bought on the train on a whim, but Dalian stuffed her cheeks without complaint.

Huey discovered tea leaves in the kitchen and put the kettle on for some black tea.

After the tea leaves had boiled long enough in the kettle, he poured the tea into the preheated cups. He did this with the aptness of a kitchen maid, and not anything like one would expect from a young noble.

At first, Dalian looked at him in wonder, but finally, she whispered without hiding her vigilance, "Have you been... a soldier?"

Huey only shook his head, "I am only a simple pilot, no career soldier. Apart from that, the war is already over, and fighting for my fatherland doesn't suit me anyways."

When he told her so, something like sadness flashed over his face for a split second.

"...Is that the reason you came to this manor?"

Dalian hesitatingly accepted the presented teacup.

"In a way, yes. Right now it isn't worthwhile to return to the university anyway, so I thought I'd laze around a bit and live off grandpa's inheritance... my uncle and cousins won't come close to this manor anyway, will or not."

Huey smiled weakly while dropping a sugar cube into his cup and stirring it.

Then the girl asked him, "Why not?"

"They are afraid! Of grandpa... or rather, of his collected books," said Huey, and smiled slightly mischievously, "As you may know, grandpa was a bibliomaniac. Apparently he once gave away half his property for a single, rare book."

"...so?"

"Um, there are rumours according to which there are also cursed books in his collection. Ones that teach their owner forbidden knowledge and ruin them that way. And sure enough, some incidents really happened close to grandpa which even the Scotland Yard had a tough time with."

"I see... so why did you come here, in spite of knowing that?"

"Well, I thought that maybe I might find what I'm looking for here."

"What you're looking for...?"

Dalian raised her face, still eating her bread. Her gaze was serious, but her neat face was full of sugar.

Huey could not suppress a quick laugh. Then he looked out of the window to evade her question and whispered, "...Dantalian is said to be the name of a demon. A demon with unimaginable knowledge, depicted with countless books in his hands. Since the library has such a high-strung name, I was a bit expectant, to tell the truth. But it looks like my hopes have been deceived."

"...this requires an explanation. How exactly have your hopes been deceived?"

Huey looked at her, slightly surprised, when she said so with an ill-humored voice.

"All of the books in grandpa's collection in the basement are ordinary. Sure, there are a whole lot - even valuable ones - but in the end those are just old books. It certainly isn't a private collection worthy of the name of a devil. The way things are now, it's also doubtful whether the stories about the strange events are the truth or not."

"It looks like you, as Wez' grandson, have an eye for books as well," Dalian said strangely haughtily, "But you really don't know anything at all."

"What do you mean?" Huey asked back seriously, "Do you want to say that grandpa had another, the real, library apart from the one in the basement? If so, where did it disappear to?"

"Just that it disappeared doesn't mean that it has never existed in the first place."

Dalian carefully sipped her black tea and pulled a grimace since she apparently had problems with the heat. She poked her tongue out like a child and blew into the hot cup.

"The [Library of Alexandria](#) in the ancient Egypt, the [Library of Pergamum](#) of the Attalid dynasty, the [Library of Celsus](#) of the ancient Romans... Phantom libraries that disappeared without a trace from this world are far from rare."

Huey burst into an amused laugh.

"I see... but I can't fathom where else in this mansion you could hide books."

Dalian sighed exaggeratedly.

"You really are incredulous... hey, do you know of the term 《vase world》?"

"The vase world? The tale of the Vaseman, right? It's written in, if I remember it correctly, the [Biographies of Magical Techniques](#) of the [Book of the Later Han](#)..."

Huey hesitatingly answered her question.

It was an ancient legend from the orient.

In the later Han dynasty, a man from Rǔnán found his way into the vase of a [Xian](#). And what he saw there was a giant, solemn palace in a separate world. The world of the vase, in other words, the vase world---

"Oh, you are better than I thought. Well done," said Dalian with a disinterested voice.

Huey sullenly showed a crooked smile. "Oh thank you... but how is that related to grandpa's library?"

Dalian replied.

"The story of the Vaseman is not over yet."

"Eh?"

"When the imperial family of the ancient orient fell, the vase world as well left the possession of the Vaseman. From then on, the vase went over many generations from one owner to the next."

Dalian continued, with an oral fluency unbefitting her young voice.

For some reason, maybe because of this discrepancy, her words seemed somewhat lively, as if she had seen the events with her very own eyes.

"When the Mongolian shepherd people ruled over the continent almost a thousand years later, the vase finally got sent from the Near East to Europe. And 300 years ago, the ruler of a certain country obtained its possession---"

"Ruler?"

"Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, [Rudolf II](#)... The king of Prague, the capital of magic."

Huey listened, engrossed in her story, since it sounded strangely true to him.

Rudolf II, also called the "the eccentric emperor", was known as a fanatic collector of artistic objects and books and for his passion for alchemy and magic, in spite of being a strict catholic. The exhibition room in his royal residence was decorated with artistic objects from all over the world and consequently called "[Wunderkammer](#)".

One could say that, in a way, he had been the most appropriate owner of the vase world.

"That king tried to gain something outrageous through the power of the vase."

"Outrageous?"

"The knowledge of... the demons."

The girl in black raised her chin a bit haughtily. Huey showed a serious mien now.

"I see... the demonic knowledge, bound into the form of books by the demon Dantalian..."

The girl nodded.

"That is the way it is. The king thought he could gain infinite knowledge with the power of that vase world, what even the greatest sages and mages have failed to achieve. The king intended to collect any kind of rare and strange books in which demonic knowledge was written down. Books from the lost ancient libraries . The innumerable amount of books destroyed by the book burners . And finally, the forbidden [Grimoires](#)... even if it meant to invade different countries now and then, he wanted to collect all the demonic knowledge in the vase world... a foolish endeavour," Dalian whispered, and averted her eyes to the ground.

"How so?" Huey asked back with a sceptical mien.

Dalian looked at him pityingly and spoke with a dreadfully sharp tone, "There are things in the world that nobody should know, human."

For a split second, her voice led one to believe she had become something inhuman.

"Maybe so," Huey sighed faintly. "This reminds me: allegedly the collection of Rudolf II later triggered a war when the king of

some other country got wind of it, which ultimately led to the downfall of the Holy Roman Empire..."

Boundless grief showed on Huey's face when he muttered "war"

Seventeenth century. It happened shortly after the death of Rudolf II.

Just before the end of the [Thirty Years' War](#), the Swedes invaded Prague and forcefully intruded into the residence of the king there. It was told that as good as all of the collectibles there were stolen or went lost.

"Yes... and the vase taken from the castle was later sold to a noble from another country. To a dilettante on this island separated by the sea."

Huey looked up surprised.

"Don't tell me it was grandpa who bought this vase?"

The black-clothed girl nodded slowly.

For a while, Huey silently watched her. Then he suddenly held his belly and bent forwards. However, he was not able to completely suppress his laughter, so his shoulders started trembling.

"I see, so that is the Bibliotheca Mystica de Dantalian... Your fairytale was pretty amusing, I have to admit!"

Huey finally started laughing out loud, which was noted by Dalian with a surprised expression.

"...Fairytale?"

"Mhm. A horror story, just like one of grandpa's. Really not bad!" Huey nodded and wiped away the tears from his eyes, before starting to laugh again.

All the while Dalian watched him with big eyes - apparently she couldn't understand his reaction.

Finally, her cheeks turned red from anger surging up inside her. Her closed lips vibrated bitterly.

"...You moron..."

Dalian spoke with a deep, unaccented voice.

"Eh?"

Huey finally stopped laughing. But that didn't calm Dalian's rage by far.

"What kind of... irredeemable moron are you? Getting all haughty just because I showed a little bit of restraint, since you are Wez' grandson... It was foolish of me to expect for even a second that an impertinent character such as you could be the Key Warden. I haven't waited for *you*, but---"

Her train of words suddenly broke off.

Huey questioningly followed her gaze. Her shocked look lay on Huey's chest. On the key which could be seen between his clothes. A golden key, with a red gem embedded in it.

"That key... how did you get it?"

Dalian's expression was again full of fear.

Huey wordlessly produced the key.

Engraved on the dead-straight shaft was a line from an old poem.

《I ask of thee, art thou mankind?

It was a strange text, somewhat like a magic spell.

"Do you know something about this key?"

Upon hearing his question, Dalian shook her head without saying a word. With her expressionless face, she seemed somewhat magical, like a delicate porcelain doll. Her appearance was groomed to that extent.

Just when Huey wanted to ask the silent girl once again, he heard a carriage stopping close by the mansion.

Dalian's face tensed when she noticed it as well.

She hurriedly turned her head around like a small animal looking for a place to hide.

Dalian stuffed the rest of the bun into her mouth, stood up and was about to start running. She intended to flee into the basement. Seeing that, Huey let his shoulders slump.

As if to calm down a timid child, he smiled gently. "Don't worry , that's probably my guide coming to pick me up."

"Guide?" asked the black-clothed girl, not reassured.

The moment she pushed the book in her arms against her chest, the bell at the entrance rung.

Part 3

Huey was examining the key hanging around his neck while inside the carriage that had come to pick him up.

Next to him sat Dalian who was busy watching the panorama of the passing streets with curious eyes.

After hearing the name of the person who had sent for Huey, Dalian suddenly changed her mind and wanted to accompany him in spite of her refusing to leave the mansion even by a single step before.

She seemed very tense since she was not used to leaving the house.

With her right arm, she still held on to the thick book she had started earlier. And with her left, she clutched the seam of Huey's coat.

"I am very grateful for your acceptance of my master's invitation," the footman politely said to Huey, sitting opposite him.

He, Richardson in name, was a footman of an affluent figure that maintained a high-class hotel in this city.

Huey had made arrangements for a dinner with Richardson's master.

"My master, Henry Conrad, was an old friend of Lord Wesley Disward, which is why he was devastated by the news of the lord's passing..." said Richardson while wiping sweat off his brow.

In spite of his polite choice of words, he seemed oddly tense.

It was not Huey's gaze he shunned, but Dalian's.

It almost seemed like the footman feared the little girl.

Perhaps he had heard of some kind of repute the girl in black had. The fact that he did not rebuke her when she suddenly tagged along substantiated that idea.

"...Therefore it is our pleasure to be able to welcome you as the lord's son today. Please make yourself at home."

"Well, actually I am the grandson... not the son."

Huey softly corrected him and took an upright posture.

"The pleasure is all mine. I am indebted to mister Conrad for allowing my sudden visit. Apparently he shared my grandpa's..."

no, my grandfather's passion. I have been looking forward to an occasion to see his collection for a long time."

"My master will certainly be delighted to hear that. Furthermore , if you could please leave the accommodations for tonight to me. I have been told by my master to take care of it."

"Much obliged."

Huey showed the sincere-looking footman a friendly smile.

Dalian observed their exchange of words wordlessly, but after a while, she whispered to Huey. "Hey... what are you up to?"

"What do you mean?"

"What are you thinking, leisurely leaving for Henry Conrad's estate just like that? You can't tell me you don't know that it was him who killed Wez. In order to steal an old book that Wez had purchased in an auction, that man made it seem like a robbery and ---"

"I am aware of that rumour," Huey shook his head without erasing his smile. "But there is no proof. Therefore, I thought I'd investigate it myself. The one thing we definitely can't rely on is the local police after all."

With those words, he touched the slight bulge on his coat. He did so without even noticing. This movement he had taken to resembled a soldier habitually checking for his gun.

"There is a proof."

Dalian quietly whispered. Her view was turned towards the sky beyond the window. It's been some time since sunset. A strangely red moon shone down from the night sky shrouded in darkness.

Huey gave Dalian a slightly puzzled look.

"Tonight there is a full moon. If it really was Conrad who stole *that book*, then he should currently be seeing what nobody should ever be allowed to see."

"...what are you talking about, Dalian?"

Dalian only calmly shook her head upon Huey's question.

"You will understand soon. As long as you are permitted to see..
."

Huey listened to her enigmatic, auspicious words in silence.

He beheld her even face, lit by moonlight, as if trying to see through her character.

"You are quite a peculiar girl, Dalian," Huey finally said with a deep sigh, shrugging.

"And you are a truly rude man," she replied while staring at Huey from the side, pouting.

"It is the building that has come into view just now."

When the carriage finally left the forest behind, the footman pointed at a manor on top of a hill.

It was a large house, built in [Tudor style](#).

The building itself was in no way inferior to the country estates of nobles. Most likely there were more than a hundred rooms.

"What a superb building. Is that Mr. Conrad's hotel?" Huey genuinely put his impressions into words.

The footman smiled contently. "Thank you very much. At this time we lodge only few guests, which is why not many employees are on hand. I ask for your forgiveness should you find something to your inconvenience."

"No problem. Is Mr. Conrad also living in this building?"

"Yes. In the tower over there at the northern front is the library. Above it is the office of my master."

"I see," nodded Huey, as he looked up at the hotel, upon which he wrinkled his brow.

The surroundings were already dark, shrouded in the veil of night. But one couldn't see a light in any of the rooms of this gigantic mansion. The same held true for the northern tower, in which the living quarters of the old man were located.

The carriage passed the gate and stopped on the carriage porch.

The outer door of the entrance was open.

But there were no traces of a butler or a parlour maid, which should should have welcomed arriving guests.

Richardson seemed to wonder as well. "I beg your forgiveness. Please wait for a moment."

With these words, he climbed out of the carriage. After telling something to the coachman, he entered the building.

And the moment his figure disappeared, "...maybe we're already too late," whispered Dalian. Then she forcefully pushed open the carriage door.

"Eh? Hey, Dalian...?" Huey looked up, surprised.

But she had already jumped off the carriage.

Her armour clanged. The girl ran into the mansion, her hair waving in the wind.

Huey had no choice but to follow her in.

He slipped through the open entrance and abruptly came to a halt.

The building was suffused with a stench.

The stench of fresh, thick blood, as well as the offensive smell of burning flesh was in the air.

Dalian stood in the middle of the room, still carrying her book under her arms.

Only her white skin glimmered faintly in this deep darkness.

"Dalian... do you know something? What on earth is going on here?"

Huey hurried towards the little girl with a tensed countenance.

What he saw when his eyes had gotten used to the darkness was a sight beyond his worst nightmares.

The entrance hall, which would do a high-class hotel justice, was completely devastated.

It was as if a giant beast had raged around. The stone pillars and marble statues lay shattered on the floor and the carpet showed burn marks.

The figures spread lying all over the hall on the floor appeared to be the employees of the hotel.

Parlour maids and servants, wrapped in pompous uniforms.

One could tell with just one look that they were already dead.

Some of them had been burned alive, others had been shredded apart by the claws of a giant beast.

A giant monster with three claws that no man had ever seen before.

"The northern tower."

Dalian turned around in the darkness.

In the current Dalian, one could see no trace of the timid girl he had met in the basement. Even with those batted corpses in front her eyes, she showed no signs of fear.

"The cause of this calamity... is probably in Conrad's office."

"In his office? Was it Conrad who cause this disaster?" asked Huey. But Dalian gave no answer and hurried ahead.

But even before she could reach the exit of the hall, a scream resounded from the cloister leading to the tower.

It was a voice they already knew. The voice of the employee who had lead them to this manor.

"...Richardson?!"

Huey passed Dalian to protect her.

He took a hand gun from the inside pocket of his coat, standing ready to use it.

It was a big, top-break revolver for military use.

"You're carrying quite a dangerous thing around with you, huh," Dalian admonished him. "Did you actually plan to take revenge for Wez with that thing?"

"I don't owe grandpa enough to go that far. It's more like a protective charm since you don't only hear good stuff about Conrad," Huey played innocent. "This one is also a memento of grandpa. I haven't taken it out in ages. So don't expect too much of my skills with it. I can't seem to like guns, you know."

Huey replied with a tense voice and entered the corridor.

Right then his expression froze because he noticed the corpse at his feet.

It was Richardson.

The footman who had gone ahead of them to the rear part of the mansion lay in the corridor, covered in blood.

A knife was embedded in his head, which still shone brightly even in the darkness.

A throwing knife.

"Look ahead!" shouted Dalian with a sharp tone.

Huey immediately raised his head.

Further back in the cloister was someone lingering conspicuously.

It was a man in magnificent clothing.

Brightly coloured socks and a jacket with golden buttons.

The man held innumerable throwing knives between the fingers of both his hands. The same knives as the one in the forehead of the poor footman.

The man raised one of his arms, still dead silent.

Huey clicked his tongue when he noticed that the guy didn't aim for him, but for Dalian.

He didn't have time to hesitate. He aimed for the chest and pulled the trigger of his revolver.

For only a moment, a light flashed in the corridor.

Huey couldn't possibly miss at this short distance.

With accurate aim, the man was hit in the middle of his chest and was blown away.

"What was that...?" Huey breathed wildly without releasing his alarmed stance. "Was that man the one who laid waste to the whole mansion?"

"That is impossible. A simple knife-thrower couldn't possibly level the pillars in the entrance hall," murmured Dalian relaxedly, before proceeding down the corridor.

When she reached the place of the dead knife-thrower, she only shook her head.

"What the...?" After catching up with her, Huey also looked at the hallway floor, and held his breath.

There was nobody there.

There was no trace of the shot man, who should be lying right there.

Neither were there his knives nor traces of his blood.

Only ashen flakes were spread over the thick carpet.

Dalian bowed down and picked up one of them.

In her hand, the dry flake crumbled to dust.

"As I thought... so it was Conrad who has taken *that book*," the girl whispered quietly, while touching the lock in front of her chest

Her voice was awfully cold and even resembled that of the grim reaper when he took someone with him.

Part 4

On the way to the northern tower, they happened upon even more corpses.

Every single one of them had been killed in a gruesome way.

Someone had been wrapped by something akin a thick rope and had all of his bones broken.

Another one had been guzzled by the fangs of a beast.

And finally, one who had been squished to a pulp by a giant something.

Among them were also some who had apparently taken up arms and attempted to fight. But even they had failed in the end and passed away. However, what they had tried to defend against remained a riddle to Huey.

"It almost looks like... they've been trampled by an elephant," Huey grimaced while looking down at the squashed body of a pitiful maid.

"Yes. That seems to be the case," agreed Dalian terrifyingly easily, without hesitating for a moment.

On the contrary, now it was Huey who was surprised and turned around to her. "By an elephant...? In such an urban mansion?"

"What are you shocked about? You were the one who came up with it."

"Okay, but elephants don't eat human meat. How do you explain the corpse of the man earlier?"

"It just means that we are not dealing with just one beast... look, like that one over there." Dalian raised her armoured hand and pointed into the darkness.

On the landing of the stairs leading to the northern tower, supposedly where the office of the old man was, there glimmered golden eyes.

Then, a golden beast with black stripes in its fur emerged.

From deep within the blood-smeared snout resounded a thundering roar.

"A tiger...!? What is such an animal doing in this country?!"

"You must not avert your gaze. When you turn your back on it, you are history," explained Dalian with an apathetic voice, as if she were reading something from a book.

Huey had no time to reply to her words. With a tense expression, he took aim.

The giant tiger lowered its stance.

As if propelled by a spring, it lunged at the two, but one moment before reaching them, Huey pulled the trigger.

His revolver was loaded with .455 calibre rounds which were enough to instantly slay a human, but the shot sounded frighteningly unreliable with respect to a beast with a body mass exceeding 200kg.

After firing three consecutive rounds into the tiger, the body of the beast finally started swaying.

Huey shot once more, while his breath had gone wild due to fear and the recoil of his gun.

In front of his eyes, the body of the animal suddenly started trembling.

It swayed as if his body had lost all substance and broke into little pieces without a single sound.

Huey watched in total puzzlement at how the remains of the creature danced in the air like ashes.

"...a phantom book has crossed the boundary." While whispering to herself, Dalian looked out of the window, up to the moon

She went up to the landing and expressionlessly looked at the ash-like flakes.

"What's the meaning of this, Dalian? What on earth was that just now...?" asked a wildly breathing Huey.

"Do you still not get it?"

Dalian turned around and let her beautiful hair dance.

"A knife-thrower, an elephant and finally a tiger. Perhaps a giant snake and a clown were among them as well... that should be enough to put it together."

"... a clown?" Huey made a clueless face after hearing her minimalistic explanation.

"A circus," explained Dalian triumphantly. "It is the actors of a circus that are wandering around in this mansion. Hey, do you not even know the 'Harlequinade'?"

"...Harlequinade?" [\[1\]](#)

"The word stands for turn-up books. Look the things where you move the backgrounds of the figures through **revealing** or **moving** of flaps. Have you not played with such things as a child?"

Huey appeared clueless, but he let his gaze wander while searching in his memories.

"...I used to have a few pop-up books. Aren't those the kind where multiple sheets are glued together and jump out when you turn a page?"

Dalian nodded.

"Yes. The harlequinades, made in the middle of the 18th century by the publisher Robert Sayer, are generally considered as the origin of the turn-up books. They were called that because harlequin-pantomimes regularly appeared in them."

"Just a moment, Dalian... what are you talking about right now?" Huey interrupted the girl with a confused face.

Dalian's tone of voice turned sour. "Right now I am giving you the gist about the phantom book that Conrad stole."

"...phantom book...?"

"Look, Huey. This is the true form of the tiger you have just shot ."

Dalian squatted down by the landing and picked something up.

Frail, ash-like flakes. The remains of the tiger Huey had shot.

He closely looked at the flakes after receiving them from Dalian.

"Paint?" he asked with a raspy voice.

The substance that crumbled into dust in his hands was dried, old paint.

No, one would have to say it was the picture itself that had been drawn with it.

The giant beast, which had brutally devoured the employees of the mansion and attacked the two of them, was actually a painting of someone.

"In the world there are illusory books that originally should not exist. The phantom books, created through the knowledge of the demon world or secret ceremonies of the devils..."

Dalian lightly clapped her hands and dusted the paint off her fingers.

"In the case when someone who can correctly read a phantom book gains ownership of it, he will enjoy immeasurable blessings. But should someone who is not worthy own it, then the phantom book will cross the boundary of the world and perturb logic as well as causality of this world. Therefore, in order to seal these dangerous phantom books, there is---"

"---the labyrinth library... the Bibliotheca de Dantalian, huh," Huey whispered with a frail voice.

Dalian nodded.

"Yes. And your grandfather, Wesley Disward, knew of the existence of the cursed harlequinade, which brought misfortune to its owner, and wanted to seal it. But the famous book collector Conrad had to let his sense of rivalry run wild..."

"And so he killed grandpa and stole the book... I see." Huey shook his head, a dark expression on his face. "But I still can't

believe it. This is impossible, right? An actual **pop-up**-book, which projects its painted scenes into reality..."

"Are you still doubting it?" Dalian shot him a dark glare. "In the 《Lidai Minghua Ji, which was written in China during the Tang-dynasty, an incident is mentioned where a dragon, which was portrayed by a gifted painter as a mural, slipped out of the painting and took to the skies. A bird, a fish and a tiger... legends, where animals drawn by master painters slip out the paintings, aren't rare in the least."

"I see..." Huey nodded with an expression as if he had chewed on something bitter. "So, a circus was depicted in the phantom book stolen by Conrad? Like in Meggendorfer's 《Internationaler Zirkus^[2]."

After mentioning the name of a famous picture book author, Huey sighed wearily.

"Like most other kinds of magic, the power of phantom books is affected by the phase of the moon," Dalian indifferently continued her explanation. "An illegitimate owner such as Conrad couldn't ever possibly control that power. Just imagine how it would turn out if all the beasts of the circus were able to cause havoc in this hotel..."

"Obviously there is no time to doubt your words... what is the plan?" He shook his head to take heart and looked at the small girl in front of him.

Her answer was short and simple.

"We have to find the phantom book and seal it. In the end, it's nothing but a simple picture book, so the mechanism should not be too complicated."

"Thanks for being straightforward. ...Dammit, grandpa sure left one troublesome thing behind."

Huey quietly clicked his tongue and strengthened the grip around his pistol.

After climbing the stairs, they reached a wide hall.

Along the way they had come across a clown and animals out of the harlequinade, but it didn't lead to a confrontation. Apparently, not all of the inhabitants of the phantom book had to be dangerous beings.

On the other side of the hall was the tower of Conrad's office.

But in the middle of the room, the twisted shape of a beast blocked their way.

When the two noticed, they stopped, completely aghast.

The figure was even bigger than an elephant.

Scale-covered skin. Pointed, deformed horns. Wings like the ones of bats, with veins protruding hideously.

And through the snout, past the tongue which was slit like a snake's, red burning breath leaked.

"...a dragon," Dalian said with an impressed voice.

Huey held his head, fed up with the events. "So that's the guy that has demolished the entrance hall... why would there be a dragon in a circus?"

"Did you not know that most circuses do have an exhibition shack for rare animals?"

Dalian answered his question easily.

"Oh, I've already seen such a thing indeed. But aren't those just animals like lizards from the tropics, which are disguised with bird wings and bull horns in order to trick people?"

"It is unexceptional when a real dragon is depicted in a picture book... by the way, what do you intend to do? Are you going to run?" asked Dalian, while looking at him searchingly.

"I guess he won't let us leave that easily..."

Huey wiped the sweat off his forehead.

As if the dragon had heard these words, he directed his bloodshot eyes towards them.

It was the eyes of a beast, stimulated by the smell of blood.

He briefly showed his split tongue and started moving his giant body with an unexpected speed.

"Run, Dalian!"

Huey caught the hand of the black-dressed, frozen girl and ran into the shadows of a pillar.

The dragon's flames passed right behind him.

The mortar of the wall brittle and some of the cement-reinforced stone pillars crumbled down.

Huey grimaced, bathing in a rain of rubble.

He grabbed his pistol with just his right hand and fired his remaining bullets, without bothering to aim exactly.

The bullets were deflected by the dragon's scales and only left a few bluish-white sparks.

The dragon didn't show even the slightest sign of pain. Huey's face tensed.

All the while, Dalian wonderingly looked at Huey's hand which held her slim arm.

Finally, her usual, cold expression returned. "We are trapped."

The stairs from which they had come had been buried by the collapsed wall.

The only way which could be called an exit was the stairs leading up the tower. But unless they overcame the dragon, they couldn't reach it.

"I know. But I'm out of bullets."

Huey opened the top-break barrel and let the empty rounds drop to the floor.

"With that thing you wouldn't be able to defeat it anyway," said Dalian with a weary voice.

Huey nodded, irritated. "Seems like it. Ohh, well... Dalian, are you a fast runner?"

"What do you mean? Do you want flee after all?"

Dalian shot Huey a reproachful glance.

Huey laughed with a self-ironic undertone and shook his head.

"I'd love to, if I could... but *you' are the one to flee, Dalian. I will catch his attention. During that time, you will run up to Conrad's office.*"

"...do you intend to become a decoy?"

"You know how to seal phantom books, right?"

With these words, Huey picked up a handy brick. Against a human, that might count as an improvised weapon, but its effect on a dragon was debatable.

"I don't give a crap about 'noblesse oblige', but a book of my grandpa is at fault for this whole mess. Therefore, I can't simply ignore it. I don't even want to imagine what kind of damage such a monster could cause if it reached the city. We somehow have to deal with this issue within this mansion."

Dalian silently watched Huey's face while he spoke with a resolute voice.

Only now, a soft smile, fitting her age, appeared on the girl's face.

Meanwhile, the dragon seemed to have lost track of them and aimlessly destroyed the pillars and objects in his proximity, spitting fire. If they kept hiding, they would sooner or later be targeted by one of those attacks without a doubt.

And in spite of that, Dalian seemed calm and said, "Take out the key... human," she ordered with a rather pompous voice. Huey blankly stared at her.

"Dalian. Now is not the time to..."

"I have acknowledged you just now," she said with the demeanour of a sublime queen.

Within her dark eyes a strong glimmer shone, resembling starlight.

"Hmph...I am reluctant, but there is no changing it now. So, should you bear the qualifications to be the Keykeeper, read now the words of the pact."

"The words... of the pact?" Huey had subconsciously grabbed the key on his chest tightly with his hand.

The golden key, with a gem embedded that gleamed red like the freshly shed blood of a virgin.

The line of an ancient poem, which was engraved in its shaft.

That short line was the first thing to come to his mind when he heard the 'words of the pact'.

Right then, a thundering roar resounded and the pillar Dalian and Huey were hiding behind collapsed.

The bloodshot eyes of this malicious magical beast caught sight of its prey and narrowed.

"I ask of thee..."

Huey removed the key from his neck and held it in front of his eyes.

He read out loud the almost faded line of the prayer with a raspy voice.

"I ask of thee, Art thou mankind---?"

Dalian smiled contentedly.

But the answer to this question did not come from her.

The metal box, which was bound around the chest area of her armoresque dress.

The lock that was attached to the girl's choker with silver chains

That lock faintly shone and declared with the raspy voice of an old woman:

《Nay. We art the Realm -- the Endless Realm within thine Vase

A faint light leaked from the chest of Dalian, wrapped in black.

The source of the light was her skin.

Her collar, which used to be covered by several layers of frills, now revealed her white skin.

Once could see a slim neck and delicate collarbones, resembling the wings of a little bird.

Furthermore, a chest, devoid of bulges, resembling the one of a boy.

In the middle of it. Above her solar plexus, where her heart should be, there was a rough metal body.

This was the first time Huey noticed, noticed that the lock on her chest had not been attached to her dress.

It was lodged directly into her snow-white body.



As if someone was calling him, Huey stretched his arm towards the keyhole.

He inserted the key into the girl's chest and slowly plunged it in

"Uh...!"

The girl stopped any kind of movement whatsoever and only let out a weak sigh.

With a rattling noise the lock opened. It swung open to both sides like a gate.

Hidden behind it was a hollow space.

A hollow space surrounded by the faint light. An endlessly deep hole.

From the middle of her soft white chest protruded a big void.

A deep, deep, empty space, that seemed to pierce her slim body.

"---The labyrinth library, which seals 900,000 and 666 phantom books. The gate to knowledge hath been opened---"

The beautiful voice resounding from Dalian's lips cast a spell over everyone who listened to it.

In the next moment, the dragon concentrated fire in its giant snout and let out a deafening roar.

Their escape had been closed off. Aiming at Huey and Dalian, the dragon ruthlessly spit out his flames.

But Dalian was faster.

Without a second of hesitation, she reached into the void in her chest. Her arm was pulled in directly though the opened keyhole. As if running an invisible path, it disappeared further and further.

When she finally pulled her arm out again, she held a book in her hand.

An old book with pages made of parchment.

The magical letters in it were written with animal blood - it was a magical tome.

Starting with the 《Liber de Nymphis by the alchemist Paracelsus^[3], there were quite a few works among the tomes of the middle ages that included techniques to control nature spirits. Most of them are thought to have been burned and even the remaining ones are mostly fakes.

But the book in Dalian's hands was a phantom book, which should not exist within this world --- a genuine grimoire.

When she opened the book, a thunderous shock wave was created next to her. She had summoned a sylph. The dragon's fire was repelled by the shock wave and reflected back at him.

The dragon bathed in his own flames and squirmed on the ground while letting out a roaring bellow.

"So that is... the power of a phantom book...," Huey whispered with a deep voice while watching the dragon's suffering.

Dalian hid her opened cleavage by hugging her book and turned around with slightly blushed cheeks.

"Come... **we** need to use this chance to seal Conrad's phantom book, **Huey!**"

Huey, who still stood there in a daze, blinked in surprise at Dalian's words.

Then he finally smiled wryly and nodded.

Part 5

Conrad's corpse was in his office.

Probably, he had been killed by the carnivores shortly after the Phantom Book had crossed the boundary, without ever realizing what was going on. His lifeless body was still sitting in his armchair, exposing a ghastly, bloodstained sight.

Still, Huey and Dalian were spared from seeing his fear-distorted face.

His head had been totally bitten off.

"So this is Conrad's Phantom Book..."

Huey spotted a book on the desk of the old man.

It was a handmade picture book with a pompous binding.

A gilded, thick cover in Moroccan leather. On the high-class paper, one could see pictures by a masterful artist.

The author's name wasn't noted anywhere, but the pictures were unexpectedly beautiful for a nameless artist. The strokes were so precise that anyone would believe the pictures could come alive any moment.

The theme of the picture book was a circus group.

But the predators that should have been there weren't to be found anywhere in the book.

They had disappeared - as if they had slipped out of the pictures.

"The book is older than I expected. From a time, when paper-making still left imprints on the finished product... it is a work from the first half of the 18th century. Who knows? Perhaps, rumours about this pop-up book have been the trigger for the development of Robert Sayer's harlequins.

Dalian carelessly picked up the picture book and flipped through it.

Between the pages, one could catch glimpses of colourful sceneries.

"A real pop-up book, huh... I wonder whether the owners prior to Conrad have also met such a tragic fate," sighed Huey in exhaustion.

But Dalian shook her head. "Books and the people that desire them attract each other. Even a Phantom Book should be able to fulfill its original purpose as a book if it enters the possession of its rightful owner."

"I see... Conrad ended up like this because he stole the book out of his childish obstinacy as a collector. The innocent servants that got involved are just too pitiful..." noted Huey while he dusted the rest of the colour off Dalian's shoulders.

The black-clothed girl nodded slightly. "Yes. If he had not known of the existence of the phantom books, nobody would have had to lose their life..." She continued with a slightly melancholic tone, "There are things in this world **that should remain unknown**."

When she closed the leathern picture book, the mansion's ominous atmosphere disappeared as if it had never been there in the first place.

Dalian locked the clasp on the cover and handed the book over to Huey.

After receiving it, he hesitatingly stretched it out towards Dalian again.

The Phantom Book disappeared in her revealed chest without resistance.

Then, Huey's gaze wandered between her and his right hand.

The key, which he should have been holding, had disappeared.

Instead, a red gem was embedded in the back of his right hand. Almost as if Huey himself had become the the key of the gate.

"So the vase world was you, right... Dalian?" he asked calmly.

Dalian didn't reply. When she turned around after fixing her collar, the big, old lock hanging there in place of a ribbon was firmly locked again.

Watching that, Huey said, "I just remembered! Once, I had already lost my way into that vase world." He smiled slightly nostalgically. "There I met a girl called Dantalian, you know? She is the one who gave me the key..."

Dalian was startled and froze.

She looked down stubbornly, as if to escape Huey's gaze.

"At that time, I made a promise with her. I swore to become her friend and get her out of there."

"I... see..."

Dalian moved her lustrous lips and quietly whispered something. It sounded like 'So you did remember after all'.

The tips of her ears were a little red.

"Dantalian is the name of a demon. The demon of knowledge who is usually portrayed with a book in his hand," said Huey while clasping his right hand.

The girl in black silently looked up at him.

Her emotionless eyes seemed to deny any question.

While knowing that, Huey still asked.

"Dalian, is your name the nickname of Dantalian?"

Dalian didn't give him an answer.

Instead, she raised her chin and haughtily said, "What do you intend to do now, Huey? I'm hungry."

Huey smiled wryly and shrugged.

Then he looked around in the devastated office. "We should better leave before the people of Scotland Yard arrive. It should be rather difficult to explain the truth to them."

Dalian nodded greatly. "I agree... so?"

"Give me a moment... for now, I'll find myself an inn for the night. One that offers delicious, sugar-coated buns for breakfast."

He directed his eyes outside, where one could make out the blurred light of gas lanterns in the fog.

The black-clothed girl seemed content and nodded.

"Understood. Out of necessity, I will have to accompany you."

After fixing his disheveled hair, he reached out his hand to the girl.

Dalian tried to make an indifferent face and reluctantly took his hand.

Then the two of them wandered into the darkness of the fog-covered city.

What remained in the blood-soaked study was only a large number of books, which had lost their owner.

Special Chapter 2 - The Lifetime Book

Der Gevatter Tod

There were two guests sitting at the counter of the bar.

One of them was an old man with a bony face and stale skin. His long, unkempt beard was white like the ashes in a stove.

The other guest was a young man who was wearing a leather frock coat.

Though his sincere features implied a good upbringing, a mysterious atmosphere enveloped him which did not reveal a single unguarded spot.

While toying with his pint of lukewarm ale, the young man was absorbed in reading a book. It was a novel with a thin cover.

When the young man had read about half of the book and ordered his second pint of ale, the white-haired old man suddenly addressed him in a hoarse voice.

"Lad... it seems you like books?"

The young man smiled at him and nodded.

"Yes. I like them. How about you?"

"...I hate 'em. They're boring."

The old man said so and chugged his glass of strong distilled liquor. Then, he laughed lightly in self derision.

"Things are just repeating themselves in this world. There's nothing new out there. Even the book you're just reading is just a clichéd plot that consists of rewritten tales and myths if we'd analyse it precisely. The story patterns people can think of have been exhausted ages ago."

The young man gazed silently at the old man and eventually smiled amusedly.

"You might be right on that."

The old man nodded with a most serious face.

"But listen, there is a single book in this world that does not get boring."

"What's that book called?"

The young man asked back calmly. The old man looked a bit triumphantly then and answered,

"Your book, lad."

"My book?"

"Right! The book in which your entire life is written down, from birth to death."

The old man raised the corners of his cracked lips and smiled. The young man tilted his head slightly,

"I didn't know such a book existed."

"I bet you didn't. I didn't believe in such a thing, either, until I saw it with my very own eyes. But for each person, there exists a book that belongs to him... of course, including myself.

"Have you read it? Your own book."

The young man widened his eyes in surprise.

"You bet! Oh, I've read it!"

"When and where did you?"

"I already forgot that. I was still a child then, you know... but I still remember this scene clearly. It was a library built like a maze. Bookshelves, tightly packed with books, completely covered the walls with no end in sight. It was almost like a cave reaching into the depths of the earth---"

While muttering so, the old man closed his eyes as if he was visiting this place in a dream.

"And your book was in one of those bookshelves?"

The young man asked back in a serious voice for some reason. The old man answered while leading the sparsely remaining liquor to his mouth.

"Yes. As you say. But not just my book. There were books of all the citizens of this country... no, there were the books of the entire world's population. The thick books belonged to the long-lived people, who have made numerous experiences. And the thin ones belonged either to the people who died young or to the people who may have lived long but have had a monotonous life."

"How was your book?"

"Mine...?"

When the young man asked him, the old man saddened.

"It was surprisingly thin! So thin, I almost fell into despair... my life was boring and, on top of that, short."

"But aren't you..."

The young man narrowed his eyes in bewilderment. Countless wrinkles were carved into the old man's face as proof of a long life.

"Oh well... I didn't want to die, you know. So I racked my brain and groped for a solution."

The old man chuckled with a dry throat.

"Our life span is destined from the beginning by this book. If the grim reaper really does exist, then I'm sure he comes to take us when he finishes reading our book... Thus, I thought: In that case I just have to make sure it doesn't end."

"Is that possible?"

The young man asked.

"Didn't I mention? My book was surprisingly thin."

The old man said slovenly.

"So I got rid of that bothering cover and tried to stick the first and last page neatly together with glue. So that one would unknowingly return to the first page when reading... in other words, there's neither a beginning nor is there an end to my book any more. It's an endless cycle."

"I see. So that's how you..."

The young man tried to bend his book like the old man had explained to him. When he overlapped the two covers, the thin book became a round bundle of paper. And indeed, one couldn't find a beginning nor an end any more.

"But I regret it now... my life was saved of course, but in return, it became a recurrence of the same events over and over. Well, naturally, since it's a thin book."

The old man said so and sent the young man a pleading glance.

"Please, lad... Could you find my book and tear it, if you ever lose your way into that library? If you don't, I'm condemned to live the same boring life without being able to die, over and over---"

"....."

The young man wordlessly gazed at the frail-looking old man for a while. Then, he smiled gently and nodded.

"All right. I promise."

"Ohh..."

While thanking him repeatedly, the old man bowed.

Tears poured out from his eyes. In the end, the old man fell prostrate on the counter and started to sleep, tired from crying. It seemed like he was completely drunk.

"My, my... did the gramps fall asleep?"

The bartender, who wordlessly polished glasses until now, recognized the figure of the old man sleeping and sighed. The young man kept silent and shrugged his shoulders. While mentioning that it's his treat, the bartender poured out new ale to the young man.

"My sympathies for listening to his horror story."

"Horror story?"

The young man raised an eyebrow and asked back. The bartender showed him a broad smile,

"Yeah. If that gramps gets drunk, he always starts to babble that story. It's always the same. I don't know how much I've already heard it myself."

"Is that so?" muttered the young man. Then he continued, but seemed to speak to himself.

"I see... a life that has become a recurrence of the same events, huh?... surprisingly, this might just be the truth."

"Eh?"

The bartender looked at him in puzzlement, but the young man just smiled and enjoyed his ale.

A tremendous roar shook the night air.

The sky was covered by leaden clouds.

The light of this month's first moon did not brighten the ground. Instead, the ground was shrouded in darkness like the ground of the deep sea.

A deafening sound was raining down on the earth like thunderbolts. And high in the sky, a swarm of white-winged airplanes was flying, producing this sinister sound of ventilation.

To be exact, large-sized two-engine military biplanes with giant wings---

Bombers, sent from the enemy country beyond the sea to invade them.

At last, black clumps fell from the bombers, one after another.

These were clumps of steel, packed with explosives and death.

The giant bombs fell on the ground, spreading fire and devastation.

The shock waves swept the buildings away without mercy and the flames burned down the streets.

This silent town had changed into a hell, filled with the cries and screams of its inhabitants.

The town was burning down tragically and crimson flames lit the night sky red.

There was a single girl at an elevation outside the town who was watching this calamitous sight in blank amazement.

"Ah... Ahh...," she stumbled with a voice as hoarse as the one of an aged woman.

It was a voice of despair.

Fire was burning down her home town - changing the landscape she had loved into mere ruins. And enveloping her dear friends and family---

The only thing that remained when the bomber formation had passed was a town in flames.

The girl dropped powerlessly on the grass, wet with the night dew.

It was then that,

"...!"

She noticed someone approaching her and raised her head quickly.

A shadow could be seen calmly walking towards her with the wildly burning fire behind it.

No, there were two of them. One had the silhouette of a young man.

The other one was shaped like a little girl.

She could not recognize the face of the girl because of the backlight, but it was clear to her that this girl had to be terribly beautiful - and that she was wearing strange clothes---

The girl was holding a single book before her. The letters of an unfamiliar language were engraved in its old and staled leather cover.

Finally, both of them stopped in front of the anxious girl.

"You needn't cry," the young man told her with a calm voice and smiled. "If something's been broken, you just need to build it once again. Right?"

The little girl handed her book wordlessly to the man who then held it out to the girl on the ground.

She looked up to it absent-mindedly. Then, she accepted the book, reaching out her hands unconsciously, and asked back,

"...What is this?"

It was the little girl who answered her question. Her silver chain brushed the old lock she was wearing and produced a cold sound.

"It is a phantom book... a book written for your sake."

"...My book... a phantom book...", the girl repeated those words while looking down at the book.

And at the time when she raised her gaze again, the two of them had already disappeared.

Chapter 5 - The Book Burners

Extra Episode 01: Bibliocaust

Part 1

An unusual type of motorcycle was driving along a dusty road.

That large-sized bike was equipped with a large displacement two cylinder engine and on its right side was a side car with a windbreak. It was an American side car for military use.

The bike was ridden by a sturdy man. He was wearing a long coat that resembled a cassock as well as rough leather boots that looked just like cowboy boots. His strange clothes made him seem like a churchman but also like a bounty hunter.

He was probably in his late twenties.

Contrary to what one might expect, he had a quite graceful face. But because he was keeping his lips grimly closed, he seemed rather hard to approach. His gray hair was neatly tied to the back and his eye brows were wrinkled like those of a pondering philosopher.

Sitting deep in the seat next to him was a beautiful girl at the age of about 16 or 17.

Half of her face was covered by big, blindfold-like goggles. But one could still recognize her prettiness. Her skin was white as snow, her hair long and silver. She seemed almost like a doll, giving her the impression of a handcrafted fine work.

The road led to a little town by the bank of a lake.

It was a town with a calm mood and houses made of stone since olden days.

On the other side of the lake was a big factory from which a long chimney towered up to the dusky sky. Several warehouses for the products of that factory could be seen on the outskirts of the town.

At last, these two strangely dressed travelers on a motorcycle arrived at the narrow street along the warehouses.

While driving the motorcycle along, the man peeked into each of the many, complicated intertwined side streets.

This course of action resembled that of a hunting dog that's chasing its prey down much more than that of a stranger who has gotten lost.

Then, after cutting several corners, the driver suddenly slowed down his motorcycle.

A slender shape could be seen standing at the center of a crossroads in front of them, surrounded by the high walls of warehouses.

"Stop! You there, stop right now!"

It was a young woman with a fearless face. Her hairstyle was plain like a man's and so were her clothes, though they seemed comfortable.

She spread out her arms, blocking their way, and called out to the driver.

Her attitude did not imply friendliness, but neither did she seem like a robber.

The only weapon she had was a baton.

The driver let out an annoyed sigh and put on the brakes wordlessly.

"Could you answer some of my questions, please?"

The woman approached them easily after confirming that the motorcycle had stopped.

Her back was stretched and her look fixed at a certain height. It was the style of walking of a person experienced in hand-to-hand fighting.

"...Who are you?" the driver asked plainly, gazing at her with a disagreeable look.

"I'm Mabel Nash. A police officer," the woman introduced herself proudly.

"A police officer? You are?"

"Yes. Oh, is this the first time you meet a policewoman?"

"Yeah," the driver nodded bluntly.

Mabel laughed awkwardly.

"I see... well, since a few years ago, women have been hired as police officers too, in this district. For one thing, there was a lack of manpower due to the war, for another thing, there were some other circumstances... besides, I've heard policewomen aren't rare at all in the capital or the southern regions, right?"

"...And what does this policewoman want from me?" the driver asked, uninterested in her talk.

"We received a report. Actually, I would be off duty today, you know... but I was asked by an acquaintance," said Mabel, smiling wryly. She looked surprisingly sociable when she was smiling.

"...a report?"

"Yes. Someone reported that a strange man was riding about in town on a motorcycle with a young girl in its sidecar."

The driver grimaced fretfully.

"Do you want to tell me that... I am that strange man?"

"Umm, I suppose so... I mean...," Mabel muttered and peeked at the girl in the sidecar.

The girl in there was still wearing goggles, moving not a single bit.

She had initially listened to their conversation curiously and now her shoulders suddenly started to tremble. Her long silver hair waved and a muffled laughter arose from her beautiful lips.

"Hrhrhr... who else would fit that image better than YOU, Hal?" she said with a sadistic voice that didn't match her graceful appearance.

"Shut up, trash."

"Were you unaware of it yourSELF? Or did you even think you were COOL?"

"I told you to shut up."

"Umm... please, you two...," Mabel interrupted them in a hurry before they would get out of control. Then, she looked at the girl in the sidecar and tensed. Only now had she noticed the weird clothing of the silver-haired girl.

She was wearing a white outfit that covered her entire body.

There were leather belts sewed in at various places of her robust cloth, tightly tied to restrain her movements. The only body parts she could move freely were the parts above her neck and

everything ahead of both her wrists. It looked almost like a straitjacket used to transport a fiendish criminal. Her dress may have been decorated with frills and laces, but it was doubtlessly made to constrain her.

And all over this straitjacket, one could see the dim glance of old locks.

Numerous firmly sealed locks on the belts of her straitjacket limited her free movement. She was being treated inhumanly - there was no other way to put it.

"What is it with... these clothes?" Mabel scowled sharply at the driver.

"Don't mind her. She's wearing it on her own accord."

"Eh?"

"I'm just adapting to your preferenCES!" the constrained girl looked up at Hal and laughed out, enjoying Mabel's disturbance.

Hal wrinkled his forehead and asked, "What do you mean by my preferences?"

"Don't play DUMB... I know you LOVE such stuff, don't YOU?"

"I am not in the slightest interested in your clothing."

"There he goes again... Don't deny that frantically just because you're in front of a feMALE. You perv."

"Shut up, trash," ordered Hal the silver-haired girl, scowling at her moodily.

At first, Mabel had been taken aback by their abusing of each other and had just gazed at them. She got a grip on herself again and turned to Hal.

"Who... who are you guys? You don't seem to be from this country, but you aren't ordinary travelers, either, right?"

"I am Hal Kamhout. She is Flam... Flamberge. We came to this town to search for someone."

"To search for someone?"

"Yeah," Hal nodded, "a young man who travels together with a girl. I don't know anything about the man's clothes, but the girl should be wearing a lock - just like the trash here. Furthermore... she carries strange books with her."

"Books?" Mabel said, narrowing her eyes cautiously.

"Do you have an idea, officer?" Hal asked her calmly.

The policewoman shrugged, "Hmm...," and explained, "Well, I don't know if you just ask me out of the blue... Are those books valuable or something?"

"Such books have no worth," Hal declared firmly.

Mabel gazed at him for a moment with a searching look.

"Tell me... are you in the clergy?" she suddenly said, as if the penny had finally dropped.

Hal's clothes looked like a priest's robe after all and, on top of that, he had tied a staff to the side of his motorcycle. This staff was huge at that and had a censer embedded in its tip. Mabel couldn't imagine that such an unpractical staff could be used anywhere other than at some kind of religious rite.

Also, his strangely insolent attitude, which didn't match his young appearance, seemed somewhat clergy-like to her. However.

"I am not a clergyman. I am a book burner," Hal said point-blank.



Mabel had never heard of such a job. At least there was no priest's title with that name in the western church. Mabel was clearly bewildered, but Hal made no move to explain it any further.

"Well, whatever... so you aren't causing this girl any harm, right?" she asked after sighing resignedly and turning around to the constrained girl.

The silver-haired girl took off her goggles with her hardly-movable arms and looked up at Mabel with a calm smile.

Then, a mischievous grin flashed on her breathtakingly gorgeous face.

"Don't WORRY. That's his way of showing LOVE."

"Stop talking crap and shut up," Hal urged her in a low voice, obviously annoyed.

He was expressing himself rather rudely, but it was obviously not just one-sided abuse.

After confirming this, Mabel said, "Alright. Sorry for bothering you."

When she waved her hand and was about to leave, "Wait," Hal stopped her. "I do have a question as well."

"What?"

"I want to buy gasoline. Is there a shop nearby where I can buy some?" Hal said, before looking down at the tank of his bike. Apparently, there wasn't much fuel left after riding around in town all day, searching for someone.

However, Mabel shook her head regretfully.

"There are no gas stations in this town. Private automobiles aren't that widespread yet... but a traveling merchant is coming here the day after tomorrow. You should be able to buy some from him."

"I see... got it," he nodded promptly.

In contrast, Mabel looked worried and asked, "What are your plans? It's quite a distance to the next town, you know?"

"I see. Then we will have to camp," Hal said without flinching.

"AGAIN?!" the constrained girl complained.

Mabel couldn't suppress a small laugh when she heard that.

"Uhm... if you'd like, do you want to stay overnight at my place?"

Hal turned his expressionless gaze to Mabel. He seemed to fail to grasp her intention.

Mabel made an effort to sound bright and added, "My home may be small, but preparing a bed and some food should be no problem!"

"Why?" Hal asked straightforwardly.

She searched for words and finally said, "Well, it's my job to protect the public order after all... and don't you agree it's safer to have someone suspicious right by my side rather than to leave him to himself?"

The constrained girl listened silently to Mabel's flustered explanation, looking at her. Then, she raised a naughty laughter and pointed at Hal.

"Did you fall for HIM?"

"O-Of course not!" Mabel shouted hysterically.

Hal only gazed silently at those two, showing no expression in particular.

Part 2

The town at dusk. Hal and Flamberge were walking on a street in the shopping district, led by Mabel.

The street was full of people shopping, people going home from work and shopkeepers at their market stalls.

But mysteriously, this scene didn't give off a lively impression. Certainly, one could hear the yells of the workers, who were lifting heavy luggage, or the fancy marketing phrases of the shop assistants. The shopkeepers were talking happily to their

customers and the laughs of a bunch of playing kids resounded in the street. There were even people chatting together at the side of the street while drinking some liquor.

And yet, all of this seemed somehow feigned. It was almost like watching the actors of a bad play.

Next to Hal, who was gazing grimly at those people, the constrained girl Flam scoffed. "Now should I call this town lively or glooMY?"

"Don't forget that we're in the countryside here. Everybody is earnest," Mabel said, defending the people of this town.

After sneaking a peek at her, Hal looked around at the buildings. Then he murmured, "An earnest rural town, huh...? There are quite many brothels, though."

"Isn't that your TYPE?" Flam said, chuckling and pointing at a nearby building.

Below a gaudy signboard, which made the type of the shop clear at one glance, there was a young woman appealing to men while exposing her skin generously. The shop was enveloped by a dissolute mood which didn't suit such a little remote town at all.

"Well... that's because there was a weapon factory, you see..." Mabel stammered an excuse.

"A weapon factory?" Hal asked after turning around calmly.

"During the war it was lively there, with military people and migrant workers. And the same can be said for this place here... well, and thus the prostitutes gathered, aiming for that," Mabel said with a regrettable tone and shrugged. "To tell you the truth, that's also why I was employed as a police officer. Police men can have quite a hard time dealing with trouble about brothels."

"I see," Hal nodded seriously.

The constrained girl looked up to him and raised a sardonic chuckle.

"A town with lots of brothels, huh... you must be happy that we came here after hearing those RUMORS! Aren't ya, Hal?"

"Don't try to misrepresent the facts," Hal replied with a scowl.

"What rumors?" asked Mabel, cocking her head.

After letting out a short sigh, Hal said: "Apparently there are many people who go missing in this town, huh?"

"Eh?"

Mabel blinked in surprise. He didn't mind her and continued.

"I heard that more than 80 people disappeared during the two years after the end of the war. That's quite an extraordinary number, considering the population of this town."

"80 people...?" Mabel grumbled in amazement and turned pale. She strained to form a smile, but she only managed to make her lips quiver. "You heard a lie... that can't possibly be."

"What makes you so sure?" he asked back in a voice devoid of emotion.

"Don't forget that I'm a police officer! I would definitely know it if something like that really happened in this town. In the recent years, not a single person went missing or died. At the most, you could say that some of the elderly who had been ill for a long time deceased in a hospital far away in another town---" Mabel clearly tried hard to explain.

But Hal went straight to the point.

"Almost all of the people who went missing aren't from here. They were travelers, merchants and other passers-by."

"You make it sound as if the inhabitants of this town would attack any stranger who passes by, don't you?" Mabel frowned, offended. Then she continued with an angry voice, "In that case, the next target would be the two of you."

"I hope so at least," he nodded with a serious mien.

Mabel gazed at him in disbelief, but she could not find a single sign of a joke.

She sighed, getting a grip on herself again, and looked seriously at him.

"Perhaps, the people you're searching for... also went missing in this town?"

"Who knows?" murmured the strangely-clothed man, while clasping his staff harder, which made the metallic rod creak lightly in his hand.

"You don't know?"

"That's why we came here. To investigate if it has something to do with them."

"I see," Mabel nodded slightly.

Then she stopped in front of a house. Despite being old, it could be called a well-built 3-story house. Stone stairs led to the entrance, which was decorated with simple but pretty carvings.

"We're here!"

Mabel walked up the stairs with sure steps and showed them in, pointing at the door. The house was apparently her home.

"Such a house despite living ALONE? Quite uptown, aren't ya? Does it pay to be a corrupted police offiCER?" Flam asked, impressed.

"I ain't corrupted!" Mabel pursed her lips. "And I'm not living on my own either."

With a slightly proud face, she opened the door. Her home wasn't as luxurious as it looked from outside, but still it was spacious.

Right in front of the entry hall was a stairway, leading to the second floor, and on the right hand side was the living room in which a stove was burning. A woolen sofa was placed in front of that stove and on it, was an old couple.

They noticed Mabel's arrival and turned slowly around.

"Welcome home, Mabel."

"You must be tired, Mabel."

They spoke stiffly, which resembled the sound of rusty gears, and smiled. That smile, however, seemed as artificial as the smile of a mechanical puppet.

But Mabel ignored their unnatural behavior and smiled back at them.

"Hello everybody. I've brought some guests with me. Two travelers called... err, Hal and Flam."

The two old persons turned around to Hal. With the exact same expression. Then they smiled again artificially.

"I see. Welcome."

"I see. You must be very tired from the journey."

They seemed as if they were repeating a set of decided phrases. Hal didn't pay attention to them and turned around to Mabel instead.

"Who are they?"

"They are my grandparents. Then there is..."

Mabel looked at the stairway.

From its landing, one could hear the footsteps of someone coming downstairs. The steps had a light sound to them, implying a rather low body weight. Eventually, a little head appeared over the handrail.

It was a little girl, around 12 or 13 years old. Her face looked almost like a younger version of Mabel's.

"Who are you?"

Her hazelnut brown eyes darted between Hal and Flam, giving them a reproving look.

"Patty." Mabel called the name of the girl, letting her know that she was behaving impolitely. Then she turned an awkward smile to her guests.

"She's my little sister Patricia. Patty, these people are Hal and Flam. I decided to let them spend the night here---"

"What did you come here for?" Patricia shouted snappily, ignoring the friendly introduction of her elder sister. "Leave! Just get out already!"

She then dashed up the stairs without leaving them time to even respond to her. After a few moments, one could hear a door closing upstairs. Patricia had shut herself in her room.

"Patty! Wait a moment... Patty!"

Mabel ran away, following her little sister.

After gazing at the disappearing woman, Flam sighed with a frown. "That girl sure behaved POORLY. Maybe she noticed that you're a perv who's dead keen on little GIRLS, right, Hal?"

"I'm neither a pervert nor keen on little girls. I do, however, think that this might be interesting---" Hal answered Flam, contrary to custom, seriously.

"Mh?"

The confined girl looked up at Hal, raising her slender chin. Her light, silver eyes became narrow like a cat's.

"At least that girl seems to have enough emotions to dislike me," murmured Hal, almost keeping a straight face.

Bathing in the light of the stove, lights flickered on the silver staff - like flames.

Part 3

After midnight, Hal slipped out of Mabel Nash's house.

The confined girl wasn't with him and neither did he carry his silver staff. The tall book burner turned over the sleeves of his robe and walked through the dark, sleeping town.

He was heading to the back of a hill that lied beyond the heart of the town.

It wasn't obvious at one glance, but if one took a good look at the city map, one could notice that the connections between the streets of this town were extremely unnatural at some points. There was one area that was largely evaded by all the streets so that one couldn't reach it by car.

It was also impossible to see it from far away because of heights and forests --- so it could be called the shadow of this town.

After walking through the darkness without rest, Hal finally reached the blockaded hill.

And he held his breath.

"I see... so that was it..."

The back side of the town that he could see from there was a gruesome view of rubble and ash.

The remains of buildings that had been mowed down by a blast. Streets that had turned into mere ashes after being engulfed in a sea of flames.

It was a horrendous sight. Even after the long time that had passed since, one could still clearly feel the magnitude of the catastrophe that had haunted this town. The traces of war.

This town had probably been air-raided by the enemy country just like the capital.

Attacked by countless bombs. Burned down by the flames the explosions called forth.

Hundreds of buildings had surely been burned to ashes - and many more humans had lost their lives.

Eventually, even the people of this town had abandoned this land.

In terms of size, the area was almost half the town's. Such a big space was left as scorched earth.

Most of the survivors seemed to be in the dark about the existence of this area - because someone was hiding it from them.

Someone had erased the remembrance of those terrible traces from the memories of the villagers.

But, who had done that? And why...?

"...Oh... What are you doing out here?"

Suddenly, while Hal was in deep thought, a sweet voice reached his ears.

When he turned around, he saw a woman standing next to him.

The woman was rather tall and voluptuous. Her dress was skimpy with a low neckline whereas her dress had a deep slit in which one could see her seductive thighs. An obscene perfume surrounded her gaudily decorated hair. She was the very model of a prostitute. Yes, almost *too* exemplary, which gave her the feel of a mere fabrication---

Like the other residents of this town, that prostitute seemed artificial.

"Hey, don't ignore me!" The woman went around to Hal's front, irritated by his silence. Then, she noticed with a surprised voice: "Oh, what a lovely man..."

She entwined both her arms around his and pushed her bosom against his chest.

"Hey sweetie. Are you alone? Fancy spending the night together with me?"

"Why?" Hal sighed, bored.

The prostitute looked in surprise at Hal's face.

"Huh?"

"I don't particularly mind when a prostitute touts on the street. But why are you at such a place?"

"Boy... what are you talking about?"

A slight sign of anger emerged on her face.

...which looked just how a third-class caricaturist would draw it.

"There should be much better places for a prostitute to lure customers. So why have you come here? Who commanded you?" He asked, while letting his gaze wander over the ruins of the town.

"Who...? What the heck? What are you...?"

The prostitute was clearly agitated. Any expression had already left her face, leaving behind a inhumanly bare face that reminded one of a sculpture.

Hal asked coldly: "Answer me. Who commanded you to come here?"

"Commanded... me? What do you mean? Seriously, what are you talking about...?" She shook her head awkwardly.

Hal continued without paying any attention to this, "Was it your own will that you came here and addressed me?"

"What are you talking about...? What the heheheck...? Whawhawhawhawhat...?" The woman's mouth formed words like a broken record player while opening her vacant eyes wide.

Hal frowned.

Suddenly, something white flashed past his view as fast as a blade.

"?!"

Fresh blood dropped down from Hal's cheek. The prostitute had thrust out her arm towards him, cutting the darkness apart: her shaking arm had suddenly, and carefully targeted, attacked his carotid artery. If Hal's reaction had been just a little slower, he would have died without a doubt.

"So it was you who attacked the strangers? No... or...," Hal asked while evading her continuous attacks.

However, the words of the prostitute were already devoid of meaning.

"WhawhawhatWhawhaT... arrrarree..." While wringing out words in a weird voice, she thrust out her fingers, aiming at Hal's eye balls.

Her arm was moving at a monstrous speed, but Hal easily grabbed it in mid-air. Yet, the woman didn't stop her movement. She lifted him up with an unworldly power just in order to strike him against the ground.

But in the moment she was about to swing her arm down, Hal muttered, "What immense strength," before disappearing for a moment and appearing behind her without making a sound.

The shoulders of the expressionless prostitute trembled clearly - as if she was disturbed. With a thunderous roar from deep within her throat, she thrust out her left arm again.

"But... it's useless."

Hal caught her bullet-like arm once again. He twisted her elbow into the wrong direction and did the same for her shoulder in one breath.

"Wha---!!!" screamed the prostitute.

It is impossible to ignore the construction of the human body - no matter how powerful one is. Her joints creaked up, strained nearly to their limit.

"Don't move. This is a technique from the oriental martial art 'Baritsu'. You could easily break your arm," explained Hal coldly.

But the prostitute didn't think of stopping her resistance. The creaking of her bones grew more intense. A slight sign of unrest appeared on the cheeks of Hal's expressionless face.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!"

The prostitute broke her arm, producing an unpleasant sound. And then her elbow was torn apart.

Hal made a stern face. Not a single drop of blood was flowing in her torn-off left elbow, which was flying away. Only a wooden cross-section could be seen in her elbow joint.

"You---"

The woman, who had freed herself from his technique, took advantage of Hal's momentary disturbance and thrust out her right arm.

The side part of his coat got cut apart and became soaked with fresh blood. He kicked the prostitute away to create some distance.

"Ah, so that's it... that's the answer...", he muttered while gazing at her left arm on the ground.

To be exact, it was a piece of wood. A piece of wood that was shaped to look like a human arm, with a polished wooden ball as joint. The lower half of a puppet's arm.

The one-armed prostitute rushed towards Hal.

But before she could reach him, he grabbed her head without a problem and struck it against the ground.

Her head was smashed up and shattered into countless dry splinters.

What was left in the end was --- the remains of a scantily clad puppet.

Part 4

The night was already over when Hal returned to Mabel's home

.

She wasn't there anymore - apparently, she had already gone to work. Hal completely ignored the old people in front of the stove and headed to the guest room.

After he had opened the door, he raised an eyebrow.

Hal's bed was occupied by two girls who were sleeping tightly close to each other. One of them was the confined, silver-haired girl. The other one was Mabel's cheeky miniature version.

The hands of the silver-haired girl were holding an old book of fairy-tales.

Apparently, they had fallen asleep while Flam was reading a fairy-tale to her.

"...you're quite laTE, Hal. Did you creep into some brothel to have some FUN?" Flam said sleepily when she noticed Hal's early return.

"What are you doing?" Hal asked brusquely.

Flam got up, letting her soft silver hair dance, and said: "As you can see! I already won over the little girl for you."

"Hmpf," Hal sneered quietly.

"Mh..."

Patricia turned herself and woke up. After noticing Hal at the door, she sat up quickly.

"You came back?" she asked.

Hal nodded calmly.

"Yeah."

"You're wounded."

"Nothing serious."

"But,"

Patricia looked worriedly at Hal's blood-stained coat.

"Did you worry about me?" he asked after finally noticing the reason why she had slept together with Flam.

Patricia hesitated a little, but then she nodded slightly.

"It's not the first time that travelers have visited this house, right?"

She nodded once more and added with a tiny voice: "They never came back."

"I see."

For a while, Hal just gazed at the little girl who had her hair rumped from sleeping. For the fragment of a second, a light of pity flashed over his eyes.

"We're leaving, Flam," Hal declared after grabbing his staff, which was leaning against the wall in a corner.

The confined girl protested with a clearly annoyed voice. "What is it, all of a sudden? Are you jealous because I chummed up with a little young gIRL?"

"Shut up, trash. Get ready."

He swung his blood-stained coat round and was about to leave, when,

"You aren't... ordinary travelers, right, sir? Who are you really?" Patricia asked in a mature and calm voice.

Hal turned around to her and sulkily corrected her:

"I am not a sir. I am a book burner."

Part 5

Hal took Flam to the factory at the lake shore on the outskirts of the town.

As it was already past opening time, a lot of machines were doing their work without rest. Despite this, it was very quiet and there were surprisingly few workers. No one rebuked them when Hal and Flam entered without permission.

"Hell, this is one desolate facTORY," said Flam, obviously bored

She was shouldered by Hal like a bag because she was unable to walk by herself.

"I looked through the archives," Hal explained plainly. "It's as Mabel said. This factory produced weapons during the war. Ammunition, bombs and gun parts---"

"The war's already over, RIGHT? What are they producing NOW?" Flam asked suspiciously.

Hal just pointed at a building within the factory area.

It was a cheap storehouse which was used to store a mountain of boxed puppets.

But they were not beautiful as one would expect. There were corpulent middle-aged men and women, skinny old men, cheeky children and finally, heavily made-up prostitutes --- the inhabitants of this town.

"Pretty weird puPPETS. Who's going to buy such things and WHY? To alleviate stress by beating them UP?" Flam asked blankly and shrugged.

"I don't think they are up for sale."

"HAH?"

"Have you ever heard of the so-called 'Shikigamis' that are used in the oriental sorcery?"

Flam smiled on hearing Hal's words. It was a beautiful, yet devilish smile.

"YEAH, it's a technique that lets a sorcerer control puppets made of paper or straw by casting a spell on THEM."

"They are probably the same," Hal stated while pointing at the employees who were producing puppets.

Those expressionless people were working steadily like machines. Exactly like the prostitute he had met last night. They were puppets only made to act out the role assigned to them.

"You're talking about those workERS? So, puppets are producing puPPETS?" Flam chuckled amusedly.

Hal answered grimly, "There is nothing strange about it if we assume that they are Shikigamis that have been ordered to produce new puppets."

"Hmpf... what's the point in making puppets anyWAY?"

"It's to replace the inhabitants of this town."

"To replace the inhabitants with puPPETS...?" Flam cocked her head, whereupon the lock at her collar produced a metallic sound.

"Most of the citizens here are suchlike puppets. Mabel was probably telling the truth when she said that nobody had died

here in the past few years. After all, anyone who dies is replaced by a puppet that acts like the deceased did during his lifetime---"

Hal watched the working employees with emotionless eyes. Suddenly, his steps came to a halt.

"Further, it looks like broken puppets get replaced by new ones as well."

A puppet in a coffin-like box was carried in. Its head had crumbled into dust and everything below the left elbow was lost. It was the prostitute Hal had destroyed the prior night.

A destroyed puppet gets replaced by a new one. And like this, the town remains unchanged.

The daily life of the past is being played for all eternity in this town---

"Why would they do THAT?" asked Flam, seeming truly puzzled.

"Who knows? Just ask the culprit herself," said Hal, turning around leisurely.

He pointed his long silver staff at the darkness beyond a passage of the factory.

"---right, Mabel Nash?" he raised his deep voice, which echoed into that pathway.

Shortly after, a young woman appeared from the metallic stairway's shadow.

The woman was wearing a police uniform. Flam raised a laugh upon seeing Mabel's tensed expression.

"OH? The police officers these days also show you around factories?"

Mabel looked a little distressed while listening to Flam's words that did not give off an impression of ill will.

Then she let out a deep, long sigh to signify her resignation.

"Since when have you known?" she asked Hal.

"Your question seems obscure to me, but if you want to know when I started to suspect that you're a puppeteer, that would be yesterday at the moment you called out to me," explained Hal in his usual frank tone.

"How?"

Mabel was clearly bewildered.

Hal didn't care and continued: "We purposely rode around in town with an eye-catching motorcycle and informed each and every citizen we met that we were searching for someone. We considered it probable for someone who has met the **Biblioprincess** to approach us when hearing about us."

"...So you lured me out, huh." Mabel sighed after hearing Hal out.

"By 'Biblioprincess', do you mean that armored girl with a lock and looks like a beautiful doll...?"

For the first time, a change occurred in Hal's expression.

Immense hatred and anger surged up from deep within his usually expressionless eyes. However, this lasted only a short moment. His mien immediately returned to his usual one, whereupon he posed a question to Mabel.

"You received a phantom book from the Biblioprincess, didn't you?"

"You mean this?"

Mabel took out the book she had been hiding behind her and held it at chest height. A slightly triumphant smile flashed over her face.

"The 'Rahouto Reihou Kaigen', huh... a long lost Taoist scripture that contains techniques to control familiARS---" Flam said, impressed.

Hal's face darkened.

"When I conducted a ceremony as it was written in this book, puppets that obeyed me were born. I merely ordered them to play as the stand-ins of the deceased villagers. It was also child's play to

increase their number by commanding the first ones I made. After all, they work without stop and I was able to use the facilities of this deserted factory..." Mabel spoke steadily. Yes, almost as if she was confessing her overflowing sin to a priest---

"Why did you try to replace the inhabitants of this town with puppets?"

"'Why'? What a silly question! To protect this town of course!" Mabel reacted sensitively to Hal's reproach. "This town was almost completely destroyed once, you know? Devastated by a bombing raid!" Mabel bit on her lips while bearing up against painful memories. "It happened on the same day as the capital was attacked by an air-raid. I'm sure their target was the weapon factory here. Due to the masses of gunpowder in the storehouses and the burning hell when they exploded, fewer than 400 people survived the attack... Do you understand that scale? Not even a fifth of a town that once had a population of 3000 people survived!"

Mabel's voice - her bitter outcry - echoed numerous times within the pathway of the factory.

Hal kept silent and heard her out.

"It was at that moment of despair that they gave me this book. They told me that it's my phantom book..."

The 'they' Mabel just mentioned made Hal's shoulders tremble.

"You commanded the puppets to substitute the citizens who died during the bombing raid?"

Mabel smiled.

"Exactly! To keep everything as peaceful as it was in times past. How is this a bad thing? The other survivors gladly accepted them, too! Well, of course. Their beloved family and friends returned to them safe and sound after all---"

"Puppets are and will remain just puppets."

Hal's harsh words shattered Mabel's smile.

"They can only follow commands. As soon as they are placed in an unfamiliar situation, they get into a panic. Yes, for example when they meet a stranger. Or when they are asked an unexpected question. Then they **fall into a rage and attack those strangers** in order to eradicate the source of their panic."

"Eh...?"

Mabel tensed like a block of ice.

"Did you not notice, puppeteer? Your puppets are the cause of the frequent disappearance of travelers around this town," Hal declared bluntly.

Mabel tried to object reflexively but suddenly fell into silence. She had just noticed the fresh wound below Hal's cut coat.

"No... you're lying..." Mabel shook her head weakly. But Hal didn't stop and continued driving her into a corner.

"People and towns change as time goes by. Naturally, some lives will also be lost in the process. But if you forcefully resist this mode of life, a distortion will come up somewhere. It's not this town you've been protecting. It's the shadow of its past. And your own weakness for clinging to that shadow."

After a moment of silence, Mabel nodded.

"Heh... I guess you're right."

A smile appeared on her her slightly downcast face.

This smile was of a sorrowful kind, but filled with a strong will.

"But you know what? It's too late to change my methods. Even if it's just its shadow, I'm going to protect this town---!" Mabel shouted out loud.

Her impression had changed. Hal noticed this fact and took up a stance. Suddenly, numerous shadows appeared behind him. Old and middle-aged people - and prostitutes.

The boxed puppets had awakened. It didn't take long until their number exceeded 10 and filled out the narrow pathway. Hal and Flam just stood there, defenseless, when the crowd of puppets suddenly charged them - with the appearance of the villagers, and with the special empty expressions of puppets.

Hal was well aware of their monstrous strength thanks to the encounter with the prostitute last night.

And he was also aware that he would stand no chance if such a number attacked him at once.

"I see."

But he kept a straight face. He just calmly removed the glove on his right hand.

"I shall burn it down then... get ready, Flam... No..."

A beautiful jewel was embedded in the back of Hal's right hand. Its color was a deep crimson that looked like solidified blood.

He clenched his right fist and when he opened his hand again, he was holding a golden bunch of keys. All of these old keys had mysterious letters engraved in them.

Long Lost Library

"'Broken Biblioprincess', Flamberge! I ask of thee, Art thou mankind---?" He shouted at the confined girl.

Flam shook her silvery hair wildly and started laughing out loud. The factory resounded with her madness-filled, loud laughter, which was a complete mismatch for her beautiful appearance.

Hal brandished the bunch of keys over his head and went about opening the countless locks that had been sealing the girl. One after another, and at each time the keys made a sound like an instrument.

The released silver-haired girl slipped out of her dress.

She hadn't been wearing anything under her straitjacket.

On her almost shining naked body, one could see a silver line reaching from her left side to her right thigh. It was a metallic zipper. A silver zipper was embedded in her porcelain-white skin.

《No. We art the Realm --- the Fallen Realm

The lips of the silver-haired girl proclaimed with the hoarse voice of an old woman.

Hal reached out for her left side and pulled the zipper all way down in a breath. A dark and endlessly deep black space opened up between the split zipper.

"The Silver... Biblioprincess...!"

It was Mabel who muttered these words with a contorted face.

Hal took out a single book from deep within the hole in Flam's naked body---

It was an old book bound with leather that had lost its color.

Mabel fiercely bit on her lips when she noticed.

"A phantom book?! But you're too late...! You have no time to read it---"

"Who said I'd read this?" Hal announced coldly.

He set up the long staff at his hip, pointing its tip straightforward. He looked like a soldier who was ready to shoot with a giant weapon. Then he **loaded** the staff by putting the phantom book into its tip.

"Cartridge Load --- Blaze!" he shouted austerely.

The next moment, bluish-white flames spit out of the tip of the staff.

The object that was spouting out this blade-like flame wasn't a staff anymore. The long body part was a balancer to bear up against the impact when shooting and the part that looked like a censer was a muzzle brake to counter the recoil. It was a weapon made for destroying.

A destructive weapon that uses the forbidden phantom books as ammunition and changes their magic into flames.

"Oh Branch of Calamity! Reduce everything to ashes---!"

The fire of Hal's staff mowed down the attacking puppets.

Those among the puppets that were hit by the magical fire were enveloped in it and crumbled down.

Mabel, who could just watch dumbfounded, stammered: "He's mad... he's using a phantom book... as kindling...!"

Hal ignored Mabel, who had fallen on her knees, and pointed his fire staff at the storehouses of the factory.

Fire balls came shooting out of the staff like bullets.

This bombardment instantly engulfed the boxed puppets in a hell fire.

Watching the factory burn down, "Aah...," Mabel raised her voice frailly.

"The Branch of Calamity that has been sealed by nine keys... don't tell me that is...," she murmured weakly, looking up at the man with the fire staff.

She pressed her book tightly to her chest.

"Are you going to... burn my book...?"

Hal didn't answer. He wordlessly pointed the burning tip of his staff at her.

Mabel sent him a pitiful smile without showing a sign of fear.

"The fire giant Surtr's cataclysmal staff, which he used to engulf the Earth in flames during Ragnarök... if you keep wielding this

weapon, you are going to be buried in your own flames just like the giant race in the myths!"

Hal nodded calmly to the warning of the puppeteer.

"I know. That's the destiny of a book burner."

Thereupon, the fire of the staff engulfed the phantom book and its owner without mercy.

Part 6

It was shortly before dusk that a tall man, together with a confined girl, visited Patricia Nash's home once again.

Patricia sat in front of the stove at the time and gazed silently at her grandparents who had stopped moving.

Her eyes were slightly wet with tears, but she was not crying. Sitting there in that dark room, embracing her legs, she looked almost as if she was waiting for time to start moving again.

It was then that Hal and his companion came back.

The book burner, who had gotten off his bike, was carrying Mabel in his arms and his long silver staff on his back. When Patricia noticed this, she widened her eyes fearfully.

"...did you kill sis?" she asked with a firm voice, after taking a deep breath.

"It's my job to erase all phantom books and everything that has come in contact with them," Hal answered coldly. "Thus," he added without intonation in his voice, "I also burned the part of her mind that has been corroded by the phantom book. Most probably she won't remember anything since she received the book even when she wakes up again."

Patricia just blinked her eyes a few times and silently pondered the meaning of Hal's words.

Then, she suddenly raised her head and confirmed that her older sister was still breathing.

"But... she's still alive, right?"

Hal nodded wordlessly and laid Mabel on the sofa where she could sleep on.

Then he turned around to leave the house. There was nothing that held the book burner back in this town now that he had extinguished the phantom book.

Patricia realized this fact and hurried after him.

Hal had already gotten on his motorcycle and was about to start the engine.

She looked up at him and said, "Uhm... thank you."

Hal turned around to her with peering eyes.

"Why do you thank me?"

Patricia couldn't suppress a laugh, finding his reaction too funny.

"I knew... it was just a long dream we were in... everybody was dead really, but we played dumb all the time. Although it would have been our duty to enjoy life all the more in place of the deceased..." Patricia stammered haltingly and then, suddenly, gave a smile. This was because the book burner seemed to her, for whatever reason, as though he was smiling in spite of having the same sour look as always.

"Thank you for saving my sister," she thanked him once again.

Hal gazed at her calmly. "You should better thank your sister. She wanted to show you---"

"I know. I will definitely never forget how this town looked like at the time it was dear to my sister," she assured, full of confidence.

After nodding wordlessly, Hal set off with his motorcycle and accelerated - without looking back.

The girl disappeared quickly after a few moments and it didn't take long until her hometown at the lakeshore became far, either.

They kept riding on the dry road for a while until the confined girl in the sidecar suddenly spoke up.

"...You look kinda haPPY, Hal," she said, while letting her hair dance in the wind.

"I don't know what you mean," Hal declared grimly.

"You were smiling just NOW, weren't YOU?" Flam started teasing him.

"I wasn't."

"Ooh yes you WERE. From ear to EAR."

Flam chuckled amusedly.

"You LECH! Did you recall that little girl just NOW?"

"Shut up, trash."

The motorcycle continued its way with those two bandying words on it.

Their backs were dyed red all the while by the flickering light of the setting sun.